



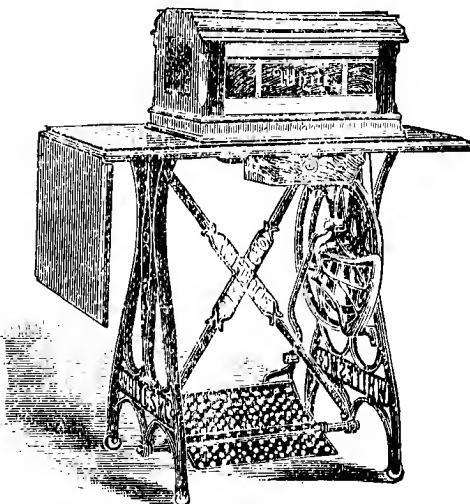
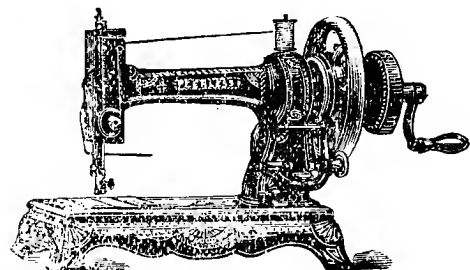
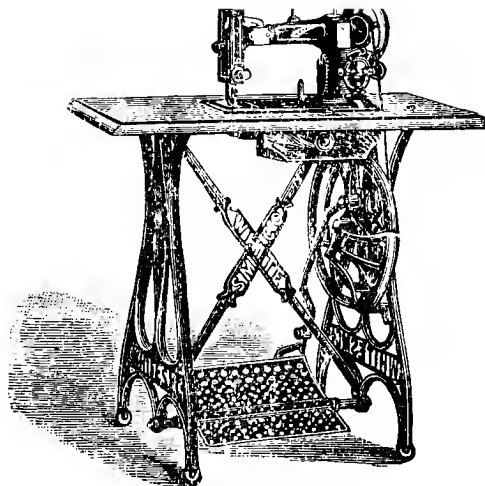
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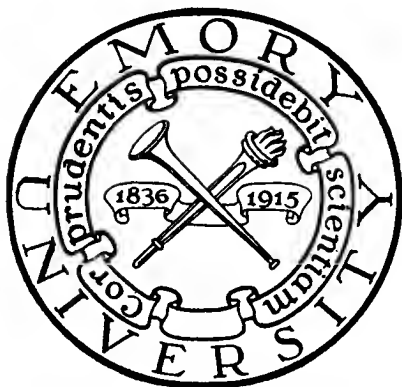
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The pang, the agony, the doubt'

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BYRON

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# PHYLLIS.



## CHAPTER I.

‘BILLY, Billy!’ I call eagerly, and at the top of my healthy lungs; but there is no reply. Where can that boy be?

‘Billy, Billy!’ I shout again, more lustily this time, and with my neck craned half-way down the kitchen staircase, but with a like result. There is a sudden movement on the upper landing, and Dora, appearing above, waves her hand frantically towards me to ensure attention, while she murmurs ‘Hush! hush!’ with hurried emphasis. I look up, and see she is robed in her best French muslin, the faint blue and white of which contrasts so favourably with her delicate skin.

‘Hush! There is some one in the drawing-room,’ says my lovely sister, with the slightest possible show of irritation.

‘Who?’ I ask, in my loudest whisper, feeling somewhat interested. ‘Not—not Mr. Carrington—surely?’

‘Yes,’ returns Dora, under her breath; ‘and really, Phyllis, I wish you would not give yourself the habit of——’

‘What! Already!’ I interrupt, with a gasp of surprise. ‘Well, certainly he has lost no time. Now, Dora, mind you make a conquest of him, whatever

you do, as, being our landlord, he may prove formidable.'

Dora blushes—it is a common trick of hers, and she does it very successfully—nods, smiles, and goes on to victory. The drawing-room door opens and shuts; I can hear a subdued murmur of voices—some one laughs. It is a man's laugh, and I feel the growth of curiosity strong within my breast. Oh for some congenial soul to share my thoughts! Where on earth is Billy?

I am about to prosecute my search for him in person, when he suddenly appears, coming towards me from a totally unexpected direction.

'What's up?' he asks, in his usual neat style.

'Oh, Billy, he is here—Mr. Carrington, I mean,' I exclaim, eagerly. 'Dora and mamma are with him. I wonder will they ask him about the wood?'

'He'd be sure to refuse if they did,' says Billy, gloomily. 'From all I hear he must be a regular Tartar. Brewster says he is the hardest landlord in the county, turns all the tenants out of doors at a moment's notice, and counts every rabbit in the place. I'm certain he is a mean beast, and I hope Dora won't ask any favour of him.'

I shift the conversation.

'Did you see him come? Where have you been all this time?'

'Outside. There's a grand trap at the door and two horses. Brewster says he is awfully rich, and of course he's a screw. If there's one thing I hate it's a miser.'

'Oh, he is too young to be a miser,' say I, in the innocence of my heart. 'Papa says he cannot be more than eight-and-twenty. Is he dark or fair, Billy?'

'I didn't see him, but I'm sure he's dark and squat, and probably he squints,' says Billy, viciously. 'Anyone that could turn poor old Mother Haggard out of her house in the frost and snow *must* have a squint.'

'But he was in Italy then; perhaps he didn't know



anything about it,' I put in, as one giving the benefit of a bare doubt.

'Oh, didn't he!' says Billy, with withering contempt. 'He didn't send his orders, I suppose? Oh, no!' Once fairly started in this Billingsgate strain, it is impossible to say where my brother will choose to draw a line, but, fortunately for Mr. Carrington's character, Martha, our parlour servant, makes her appearance at this moment, and comes up to us with an all-important expression upon her jovial face.

'Miss Phyllis, your ma wants you in the drawing-room at oncet,' she says. 'The strange gentleman is there, and——'

'Wants *me*?' I ask, in astonishment, not being usually regarded as a drawing-room ornament. 'Martha, is my hair tidy?'

'Tis lovely!' returns Martha; and thus encouraged, I give my dress one or two hasty pulls and follow in Dora's footsteps.

A quarter of an hour later I rush back to Billy, and discover him standing, with bent head and shoulders, in a tiny closet that opens off the hall, and is only divided from the drawing-room by the very frailest of partitions. His attitude is crumpled, but his face betrays the liveliest interest as he listens assiduously to all that is going on inside.

'Well, what is he like?' he asks in a stage whisper, straightening himself slightly as he sees me, and pointing in the direction of the closet.

'Very nice,' I answer, with decision, 'and not dark at all—quite fair. I asked him about the wood when I got the chance, and he said we might go there whenever we chose, and that it would give him great pleasure if we would consider it as our own. There! And it was not he turned out old Nancy Haggard: it was that wretch Simmons, the steward, without any orders; and Mr. Carrington has dismissed him, and——'

Here Billy slips off a jam pot on which he has been standing, with a view to raising himself, stumbles heavily, and creates an appalling row; after which, mindful of consequences, he picks himself up silently, and together we turn and flee.

## CHAPTER II.

I AM seventeen—not sweet seventeen—there is nothing sweet about *me*. I am neither fair nor dark, nor tall nor short; nor indeed anything in particular that might distinguish me from the common herd. This is rather hard upon me, as all the rest of us can lay claim to beauty in one form or another. Thus, Roland, my eldest brother, is tall, very aristocratic in appearance, and extremely good to look at; Dora, who comes next, is small and exquisitely pretty, in a fresh fairy-like style; while Billy, the youngest born, has one of the handsomest faces imaginable, with liquid brown eyes of a gentle pleading expression, that smile continually, and utterly belie the character of their owner.

Why I was born at all, or why, my creation being a settled matter, I was not given to the world as a boy, has puzzled and vexed me for many years. I am entirely without any of the little graceful kittenish blandishments of manner that go far to make Dora the charming creature she is; I have too much of Billy's recklessness, mixed up with a natural carelessness of my own, to make me a success in the family circle. To quote papa in his mildest form, I am a 'sad mistake,' and one not easy to be rectified; while mother, who is the gentlest soul alive, reproves and comforts me from morning until night, without any result to speak of.

I am something over 5 feet 2, with brown hair and a brown skin, and eyes that might be blue or grey

according to fancy. My feet are small and well shaped, and so are my hands; but as for seventeen years I have borne an undying hatred towards gloves, these latter cannot be regarded with admiration. My mouth is of a goodly size, and rather determined in expression; while as to my figure, if Roland is to be believed, it resembles nothing so much as a fishing-rod. But my nose—that at least is presentable and worthy of a better resting-place: it is indeed a most desirable nose in every way; and being my only redeeming point, is one of which I am justly proud.

Nevertheless, as one swallow makes no summer, so one feature will not beautify a plain face; and in spite of my Grecian treasure I still remain obscure. If not ornamental, however, I manage to be useful—I am an excellent foil to my sister Dora. She is beyond dispute our bright particular star, and revels in that knowledge. To be admired is sun and air and life to Dora, who resembles nothing in the world so much as an exquisite little Dresden figure, so delicate, so pink-and-white, so yellow-haired, and always so bewitchingly attired. She never gets into a passion, is never unduly excited. She is too pretty and too fragile for the idea, else I might be tempted to say that on rare occasions she sulks. Still she is notably good-tempered, and has a positive talent for evading all unpleasant topics that may affect her own peace of mind.

Papa is a person to be feared; mother is not; consequently we all love mother best. In appearance the head of our family is tall, lean, and unspeakably severe. With him a spade is always a spade, and his *nay* is indeed nay. According to a tradition amongst us, that has grown with our growth, in his nose—which is singularly large and obtrusive—lies all the harshness that characterises his every action. Indeed, many a time and oft have Billy and I speculated as to whether, were he suddenly shorn of his proboscis, he would also find himself deprived of his strength of mind.

He is calm, and decidedly well-bred, both in manner and expression, two charms we do not appreciate, as, on such frequent occasions as when disgrace falls upon one or all of the household, the calmness and breeding become so terrible that, without so much as a frown, he can wither us beyond recognition.

I am his particular *bête noire*: my hoydenish ways jar every hour of the day upon his sensitive nerves. He never tires of contrasting me unfavourably with his gentle, elegant Dora. He detests gushing people, and I, unhappily for myself, am naturally very affectionate. I feel not only a desire to love, but at times an unconquerable longing to openly declare my love; and as Roland is generally with his regiment, and Dora is a sort of person who would die if violently embraced, I am perforce obliged to expend all my superfluous affection upon our darling mother and Billy.

Strict economy prevails amongst us; more through necessity, indeed, than from any unholy desire to save. Our annual income of 800*l.* goes but a short way under any circumstances, and the 100*l.* a-year out of this we allow Roland (who is always in a state of insolvency) leaves us 'poor indeed.' A new dress is, therefore, a rarity—not perhaps so strange a thing to Dora as it is to me—and any amusement that cost money would be an unheard-of luxury. Outdoor conveyances we have none, unless one is compelled to mention a startling vehicle that lies in the coach-house, and was bought no one remembers when or where. It is probably an heirloom, and is popularly supposed to have cost a fabulous sum in the days of its youth and beauty, but it is now ancient and sadly disreputable, and not one of us but feels low and dejected when, tucked into it on Sunday mornings, we are driven by papa to attend the parish church. I even remember Dora shedding tears now and then as this ordeal drew nigh; but that was when the Desmonds or the Cuppaidges had a young man staying with them, who might reasonably be expected to

put in an appearance during the service, and who would be sure to linger and witness our disgraceful retreat afterwards.

Of course papa has his two hunters. We have been taught that no gentleman could possibly get on without them in a stupid country place, and that it is more from a noble desire to sustain the respectability of the family than from any pleasure that may be derived from them that they are kept. We try to believe this—but we don't.

We see very few neighbours, for the simple reason that there are very few to see. This limits dinner parties, and saves expense in many ways, but rather throws us younger fry upon our own resources. No outsiders come to disturb our uninteresting calm; we have no companions, no friends beyond our hearthstone. No alarming incidents occur to season our deadened existence; no one ever elopes with the wife of his bosom friend. All is flat, stale, and unprofitable.

It is, then, with mingled feelings of fear and delight that we hear of Strangemore being put in readiness to receive its master. Mr. Carrington, our new landlord—our old one died about five years ago—has at length wearied of a foreign sojourn, and is hastening to the land of his fathers. So ran report three weeks before my story opens, and for once truly. He came, he saw, he—— No, we have all arranged ages ago—it is Dora who is to conquer.

‘He is exceedingly to be liked,’ says mamma, that night at dinner, addressing papa, and alluding to our landlord, ‘and so very distinguished-looking. I rather think he admired Dora—he never removed his eyes from her face the entire time he stayed.’ And mother nods and smiles approvingly at my sister.

‘That must have been rather embarrassing,’ says papa, in his even way; but I know by his tone he too is secretly pleased at Mr. Carrington's rudeness.

Dora blushes, utters a faint disclaimer, and then

laughs: her own low cooing laugh, that is such a wonderful piece of performance. I have spent hours in my bedroom endeavouring patiently to copy that laugh of Dora's, with failure as the only result.

'And he is so good-natured!' I break in, eagerly. 'The very moment I mentioned the subject he gave us permission to go to Brinsley Wood as often as ever we choose; and seemed quite pleased at my asking him if we might—didn't he, mother?'

'Yes, dear.'

'Could you find no more interesting topic to discuss with him than that?' asks papa, with contemptuous displeasure. 'Was his first visit a fitting opportunity to demand a favour of him? It is a pity, Phyllis, you cannot put yourself and your own amusements out of sight, even on an occasion. There is no vice so detestable as selfishness.'

I think of the two hunters, and of how long mother's last black silk has been her best gown, and feel rebellious; but long and early training having taught me to subdue my emotions, I accept the snub dutifully and relapse into taciturnity.

'It was not he turned out poor old Martha Haggard after all, papa,' puts in Billy; 'it was Simmons; and he is to be dismissed immediately.'

'I am glad of that,' says papa, viciously. 'A more thoroughgoing rascal never disgraced a neighbourhood. He will be doing a really sensible thing if he sends that fellow adrift. I am gratified to find Carrington capable of acting with such sound common sense. None of the absurd worn-out prejudices in favour of old servants about him. I have no doubt he will prove an acquisition to the county.'

Altogether, it is plainly to be seen, we every one of us intend approving of our new neighbour.

'Yes, indeed,' says mother, 'it is quite delightful to think of a young man being anywhere near. We shall be in want of cheerful society. What a pity he

did not come home directly his uncle died and left him the property, instead of wasting these last five years abroad !’

‘I think he was right,’ returns papa, gracefully ; ‘there is nothing like seeing life. When hampered with a wife and children he will regret he did not enjoy more of it, before tying himself down irretrievably.’

An uncomfortable silence follows this tender speech. We all feel guiltily conscious that we are hampering our father—that but for our unwelcome existence he might at the present hour be enjoying all the goods and gaieties of life ; all, that is, except Billy, who is insensible to innuendoes, and never sees or feels anything that is not put before him in the plainest terms. He cheerfully puts an end now to the awkward silence.

‘I can tell you, if you marry Mr. Carrington, you will be on the pig’s back,’ he says, knowingly addressing Dora. Billy is not choice in his expressions. ‘He has no end of tin, and the gamest lot of horses in his stables to be seen anywhere. Brewster was telling me about it.’

Nobody says anything.

‘You will be on the pig’s back, I can tell you,’ repeats Billy, with emphasis. Now, this is more than rashness, it is madness on Billy’s part ; he is ignorantly offering himself to the knife. The fact that his vulgarity has been passed by unnoticed once is no reason why leniency should be shown towards him a second time. Papa looks up blandly.

‘May I ask what you mean by being “on the pig’s back”?’ he asks, with a suspicious thirst for information.

‘Oh, it means being in luck, I suppose,’ returns Billy, only slightly taken aback.

‘I do not think I should consider it a lucky thing if I found myself on a pig’s back,’ says papa, still apparently abroad, still desirous of having his ignorance enlightened.



'I don't suppose you would,' responds Billy, gruffly, and being an English boy, abhorrent of irony, he makes a most unnecessary clatter with his fork and spoon.

'I know what papa means,' says Dora, sweetly, coming prettily to the rescue. One of Dora's favourite rôles is to act as peacemaker on such public occasions as the present, when the innate goodness of her disposition can be successfully paraded. 'It is that he wishes you to see how unmeaning are your words, and how vulgar are all hackneyed expressions. Besides'—running back to Billy's former speech—'you should not believe all Brewster tells you; he is only a groom, and probably says a good deal more than—than he ought.'

'There!' cries Billy, with wrathful triumph, 'you were just going to say "more than his prayers," and if *that* isn't a "hackneyed expression" I don't know what's what. You ought to correct yourself, Miss Dora, before you begin correcting other people.'

'I was *not* going to say that,' declares Dora, in a rather sharper tone.

'Yes, you were, though. It was on the very tip of your tongue.'

'I was *not*,' reiterates Dora, her pretty oval cheeks growing pink as the heart of a rose, while her liquid blue eyes change to steel grey.

'That's a——'

'William, be silent,' interrupts papa, with authority, and so for the time being puts a stop to the family feud.

### CHAPTER III.

THE next day Mr. Carrington calls again—this time ostensibly on business matters—and papa and he discuss turnips and other farm produce in the study, until the interview becomes so extended that it occurs to the

rest of us they must be faint. Maamma sends in sherry as a restorative, which tranquillises our fears and enables us to look with more cheerfulness towards the end.

Before leaving, however, Mr. Carrington finds his way to the drawing-room, where Dora and I are sitting alone, and, having greeted us, drags a chair lazily after him, until he gets within a few feet of Dora. Here he seats himself.

Dora is tatting. Dora is always tatting—she never does anything else; and surely there is no work so pretty, so becoming to white fingers, as that in which the swift little shuttle is brought to bear. Nevertheless, though he is beside my sister, I never raise my head without encountering his blue eyes fixed upon me.

His eyes are very handsome, large, and dark, and wonderfully kind—eyes that let one see into the true heart beyond; indeed, his whole face is full of beauty. He makes no unwise attempt to hide it, beyond the cultivation of a fair brown moustache that does not altogether conceal the delicately-formed mouth beneath, the lips of which are fine, and almost sensitive enough to be womanish, but for a certain touch of quiet determination about them and the lower jaw. He is tall, and rather slightly moulded, and has a very clean-shaped head. His hands are white and thin, but large; his feet very passable.

‘Do you know,’ he is saying to sympathetic Dora, while I take the above inventory of his charms, ‘I have quite an affection for this house? I was born here, and lived in it until my father died.’

‘Yes, I knew that,’ says Dora, softly, with a liquid glance. ‘And all yesterday, after you had left, I kept wondering whether you felt it very strange and sad seeing new faces in your old home.’

‘Did you really bestow a thought upon me when I was out of sight?’ with mild surprise. ‘Are you in

earnest? Do you know, Miss Vernon, I begin to believe it is a foolish thing to stay too long away from one's native land—away from the society of one's own countrymen—a man feels so dangerously pleased with any little stray kind word that may be said to him on his return. I have been living a rather up-and-down sort of life—not quite so civilised as it might have been, I fear—and it now seems absolutely strange that anyone should take the trouble to think about me.' He says all this in a slow, rather effective tone, looking pensively at Dora the while.

Here is an opportunity not to be wasted, and Dora instantly blushes her very best blush. Then becoming charmingly confused, lets her glance once more fall on her tatting.

'That is awfully pretty work you are doing,' says Mr. Carrington, taking up the extreme edge of it and examining it with grave interest. 'I like to see women working, when their hands are soft and white. But this looks a difficult task; it must have taken you a long time to master the intricacies.'

'Oh, no. It is quite simple—just in and out, you see, like this. Anyone could learn it, if they just put their mind to it.'

'Do you think you could teach me, if I put my mind to it?' asks Mr. Carrington. And then their eyes meet; their heads are close together over the work; they smile, and continue the gaze until Dora's lids droop bashfully.

I am disgusted. Evidently they regard me in the light of a babe or a puppy, so little do they allow my presence to interfere with the ripple of their inane conversation. I am more nettled by their indifference than I care to confess even to myself, and come to the uncharitable conclusion that Mr. Carrington is an odious flirt, and my sister Dora a fool.

'When you left this house where did you go then?' asks Dora presently, returning to the charge.

‘To Strangemore—to my uncle. Then Ada—that is my sister, Lady Hancock, married, and I went into the Guards. You see I am determined to make friends with you,’ he says, pleasantly, ‘so I begin by telling you all I know about myself.’

‘I am glad you wish us to be your friends,’ murmurs Dora, innocently. ‘But I am afraid you will find us very stupid. You, who have seen so much of the world, will hardly content yourself in country quarters, with only country neighbours.’ Another glance from the large childish eyes.

‘Judging by what I have already seen,’ says Mr. Carrington, returning the glance with interest, ‘I believe I shall feel not only content, but thoroughly happy in my new home.’

‘Why did you leave your regiment?’ I break in irrelevantly, tired of being left out in the cold, and anxious to hear my own voice again, after the longest silence I have ever kept.

Dora sighs gently and goes back to the tatting. Mr. Carrington turns quickly to me.

‘Because I tired of the life; the ceaseless monotony was more than I could endure. So when my uncle died and I came in for the property, five years ago, I cut it, and took to foreign travelling instead.’

‘I think if I were a man I would rather be a soldier than anything,’ I say, with effusion. ‘I cannot imagine anyone disliking the life; it seems to me such a gay one, so good in every respect. And surely anything would be preferable to being an idler.’

I am unravelling a quantity of scarlet wool that has been cleverly tangled by Cheekie, my fox-terrier, and so between weariness and the fidgets—brought on by the execution of a task that is utterly foreign to my tastes—I feel snappish, and have pointed my last remark. Dora looks up in mild horror, and casts a deprecating glance at our visitor. Mr. Carrington laughs—a short, thoroughly amused laugh.

‘But I am not an idler,’ he says; ‘one may find something to do in life besides taking the Queen’s money. Pray, Miss Phyllis, do not add to my many vices one of which I am innocent. I cannot accuse myself of having wasted even five minutes since my return home. Do you believe me?’

I hasten to apologise.

‘Oh, I did not mean it, indeed,’ I say, earnestly; ‘I assure you I did not. Of course you have plenty to do. You must think me very rude.’

I am covered with confusion. Had he taken my words in an unfriendly spirit I might have rallied, and rather enjoyed my triumph; but his laugh has upset me. I feel odiously, horribly young, both in manner and appearance. Unaccustomed to the society of men, I have not had opportunities of cultivating the well-bred *insouciance* that distinguishes the woman of the world, and therefore betray hopelessly the shyness that is consuming me. He appears cruelly cognisant of this fact, and is evidently highly delighted with my embarrassment.

‘Thank you,’ he says; ‘I am glad you exonerate me. I felt sure you did not wish to crush me utterly. If you entertained a bad opinion of me, Miss Phyllis, it would hurt me more than I can say.’

A faint pause, during which I know his eyes are still fixed with open amusement upon my crimson countenance. I begin to hate him.

‘Have you seen the gardens?’ asks Dora, musically. ‘Perhaps to walk through them would give you pleasure, as they cannot fail to recall old days. And the remembrance of a past that has been happy is so sweet.’ Dora sighs, as though she were in the habit of remembering perpetual happy pasts.

‘I shall be glad to visit them again,’ answers Mr. Carrington, rising, as my sister lays down the ivory shuttle. He glances wishfully at me, but I have not yet recovered my equanimity, and rivet my gaze upon my wool relentlessly as he passes through the open window.

## CHAPTER IV.

**It** is four o'clock. There is a delicious hush all over the house and grounds, a hush that betrays the absence of the male bird from his nest, and bespeaks security. Billy and I, hat in hand, stand upon the door-step, and look with caution round us, preparatory to taking flight to Brinsley Wood. Ever since my unlucky confession of having asked Mr. Carrington's permission to wander through his grounds—thereby betraying the pleasure I feel in such wanderings—we have found it strangely difficult to get beyond the precincts of our home. Obstacles the most unforeseen crop up to stay our steps, some supernatural agency being apparently at work, by which papa becomes cognisant of even our most secret intentions.

To-day, however, brings us such a chance of freedom as we may not have again, business having called our father to an adjoining village, from which he cannot possibly return until the shades of evening have well fallen. Our evil genius too has for once been kind, having forgotten to suggest to him before starting the advisability of regulating our movements during the hours he will be absent. We are, therefore, unfettered, and with a glow of pleasure not unmixed with triumph, we sally off towards the deep green woods.

It is that sweetest month of all the twelve, September—a glorious ripe September, that has never yet appeared so sweet and golden-brown as on this afternoon, that brings us so near the close of it. High in the trees hang clusters of filberts, that have tempted our imagination for some time, and now, with a basket slung between us, that links us as we walk, we meditate a raid.

**As** with light exultant footsteps we hurry onwards

snatches of song fall from my lips—a low soft contralto voice being my one charm. We are utterly, carelessly, recklessly happy, with that joyous forgetfulness of all that has gone before, and may yet follow, that belongs alone to youth. Now and then Billy's high boyish notes join mine, making the woods ring, until the song comes to sudden grief through lack of memory, when gay laughter changes the echo's tone. Here a bunch of late and luscious blackberries claim our attention. And once we have a mad race after a small brown squirrel that evades us cleverly, and presently revenges itself for its enforced haste by grinning at us provokingly from an inaccessible branch.

At last the wood we want is reached; the nuts are in full view: our object is attained.

'Now,' asks Billy, with a sigh of delight, 'at which tree shall we begin?' It is a mere matter of form his asking me this question, as he would think it derogatory to his manly dignity to follow any suggestion I might make.

All the trees are laden—they more than answer our expectations. Each one appears so much better than the other it is difficult to choose between them.

'At this,' I say at length, pointing to one richly clothed that stands before us.

'Not at all,' returns Billy, contemptuously; 'it isn't half as good as this one,' naming the companion tree to mine; and his being the master-mind, he carries the day.

'Very good; don't miss your footing,' I say, anxiously, as he begins to climb. There are no lower branches, no projections of any kind to assist his ascent—the task is far from easy.

'Here, give me a shove,' calls out Billy, impatiently, when he has slipped back to mother earth the fourth time, after severely barking his shins. I give him a vigorous push that raises him successfully to an overhanging limb, after which, being mere hand-over-hand



work, he rises rapidly, and soon the spoiler reaches his prey.

Down come the little bumping showers; if on my head or arms so much the greater fun. I dodge—Billy aims—the birds grow nervous at our unrestrained laughter. Already our basket is more than half-full, and Billy is almost out of sight amongst the thick foliage, so high has he mounted.

Slower, and with more uncertain aim, come the nuts. I begin to grow restless. It is not so amusing as it was ten minutes ago, and I look vaguely round me in search of newer joys.

At no great distance from me I spy another nut-tree, equally laden with treasure and far easier of access. Low, almost to the ground, some of the branches grow. My eyes fasten upon it: a keen desire to climb and be myself a spoiler seizes upon me. I lay my basket on the ground, and thought and action being one with me, I steal off without a word to Billy and gain the wished-for spot.

Being very little inferior to Billy in the art of climbing—long and dearly bought experience having made me nimble—it is at very little risk and with small difficulty I soon find myself at the top of the tree, comfortably seated on a thick arm of wood, plucking my nuts in safety. I feel immensely elated, both at the eminence of my situation and the successful secrecy with which I have carried out my plan. What fun it will be presently to see Billy looking for me everywhere! He will at first think I have gone roaming through the wood; then he will imagine me lost, and be a good deal frightened;—it will be some time before he will suspect me of the truth.

I fairly laugh to myself as these ideas flit through my idle brain—more, perhaps, through real gaiety of heart than from any excellence the joke contains—when, suddenly raising my head, I see what makes my mischievous smile freeze upon my lips.

From my exalted position I can see a long way before me, and there in the distance, coming with fatal certainty in my direction, I espy Mr. Carrington! At the same moment Billy's legs push themselves in a dangling fashion through the branches of his tree, and are followed by the remainder of his person a little later. Forgetful of my original design, forgetful of everything but the eternal disgrace that will cling to me through life, if found by our landlord in my present unenviable plight, I call to him—in tones suppressed, indeed, but audible enough to betray my hiding-place.

'Billy, here is Mr. Carrington—he is coming towards us. Catch these nuts quickly while I get down.'

'Why, where on earth ——' begins Billy; and then, grasping the exigencies of the case, refrains from further vituperation and comes to the rescue.

The foe steadily advances. I fling all my collected treasure into Billy's upturned face, and, seizing a branch, begin frantically to beat a retreat. I am half-way down, but still very, *very* far from the ground—at least, so far that Billy can render me no assistance—when I miss my footing, slip a little way against my will, and then sustain a check. Some outlying bough with vicious and spiteful intent has laid hold on my gown in such a way that I cannot reach to undo it.

'Come down, can't you?' says Billy, with impatience; 'you are showing a yard and a half of your leg.'

'I can't,' I groan; 'I'm caught somewhere. Oh! *what* shall I do?'

Meantime Mr. Carrington is coming nearer and nearer. As I peer at him through the unlucky branches I can see he is looking if anything rather handsomer than usual, with his gun on his shoulder and a pipe between his lips. As he meets my eyes riveted upon him from my airy perch he takes out the pipe and consigns it to his pocket. If he gets round to the other side of the tree, from which point the horrors of my

position are even more forcibly depicted, I feel I shall drop dead.

‘Why don’t you get that lazy boy to do the troublesome part of the business for you?’ calls out our unwelcome friend, while yet at some distance. Then, becoming suddenly aware of my dilemma, ‘Are you in any difficulty? Can I help you down?’

He has become preternaturally grave—so grave that it occurs to me he may possibly be repressing a smile. Billy, I can see, is inwardly convulsed. I begin to feel very wrathful.

‘I don’t want any help,’ I say, with determination. ‘But for my dress I could manage——’

‘Better let me assist you,’ says Mr. Carrington, making a step forward. In another moment he will have gained the other side, and then all will be indeed lost.

‘No, no,’ I cry, desperately; ‘I *won’t* be helped. Stay where you are.’

‘Very good,’ returns he, and immediately presenting his back to me, makes a kind pretence of studying the landscape.

Now, although this is exactly the thing of all others I most wish him to do, still the voluntary doing of it on his part induces me to believe my situation a degree more indecent than before. I feel I shall presently be dissolved in tears. I tug madly at my unfortunate dress without making the faintest impression upon it. Oh! why is it that my cotton—that up to this has been so prone to reduce itself to rags—to-day should prove so tough? My despair forces from me a heavy sigh.

‘Not down yet?’ says Mr. Carrington, turning to me once more. ‘You will never manage it by yourself. Be sensible and let me put you on your feet.’

‘No,’ I answer, in an agony; ‘it *must* give way soon. I shall do it, if—if—you will only turn your back to me again.’ It is death to my pride to have to make this request. I nerve myself to try one more

heroic effort. The branch I am clinging to gives with a crash. 'Oh!' I shriek frantically, and in another moment fall headlong into Mr. Carrington's outstretched arms.

'Are you hurt?' he asks, gazing at me with anxious eyes, and still retaining his hold of me.

'Yes, I am,' I answer, tearfully. 'Look at my arm.' I pull up my sleeve cautiously and disclose an arm that looks indeed wonderfully white next the blood that trickles slowly from it.

'Oh, horrible!' says our rich neighbour, with real and intense concern, and, taking out his handkerchief, proceeds to bind up my wound with the extremest tenderness.

'Why didn't you let him take you down?' says Billy, reproachfully, who is rather struck by the blood. 'It would have been better after all.'

'Of course it would,' says Mr. Carrington, raising his head for a moment from the contemplation of his surgical task to smile into my eyes. 'But some little children are very foolish.'

'I was seventeen last May,' I answer promptly. It is insufferable to be regarded as a child when one is almost eighteen. There is a touch of asperity in my tone.

'Indeed! So old?' says our friend, still smiling.

'Mr. Carrington,' I begin presently, in a rather whimpering tone, 'you won't say anything about this at home—*will* you? You see they—they might not like the idea of my climbing, and they would be angry. Of course I know it was very unladylike of me, and *indeed*'—very earnestly this—'I had no more intention of doing such a thing when I left home than I had of flying. Had I, Billy?'

'You had not,' says Billy. 'I don't know what put the thought into your head. Why, it is two years since last you climbed a tree.'

This is a fearful lie; but the dear boy means well.

‘You won’t betray me?’ I say again to my kind doctor.

‘I would endure the tortures of the rack first,’ returns he, giving his bandage a final touch. ‘Be assured they shall never hear of it from me. You must not suspect me of being a talebearer, Miss Phyllis. Does your arm pain you still—have I made it more comfortable?’

‘I hardly feel it at all now,’ I answer gratefully. ‘I don’t know what I should have done but for you—first catching me as you did, and then dressing my hurt. But how shall I return you your handkerchief?’

‘May I not call to-morrow to see you are none the worse for your accident? It is a long week since last I was at Summerleas. Would I bore you all very much if I showed myself there again so soon?’

‘Not at all,’ I answer, warmly, thinking of Dora; ‘the oftener you come the more we shall be pleased.’

‘Would it please *you* to see me often?’ He watches me keenly as he asks this question.

‘Yes, of course it would,’ I answer, politely, feeling slightly surprised at his tone—*very* slightly.

‘How long have you known me now?’

‘Exactly a month yesterday,’ I exclaim, promptly; ‘it was on the 25th of August you first came to see us. I remember the date perfectly.’

‘Do you?’ with pleased surprise. ‘What impressed that uninteresting date upon your memory?’

‘Because it was on that day Billy got home the new pigeons—such little beauties, all pure white. They were unlucky, however, as two of them died since.—That is how I recollect its being a month,’ I continue, recurring to his former words.

‘Oh—I suppose you would hardly care to remember anything in which Billy was not concerned. Sometimes—not always—I envy Billy. And so it is really only a month since first I saw you? To *me* it seems a year—more than a year.’

‘Ah! what did I tell you?’ I say, speaking in the eager tone one adopts when triumphantly proving the correctness of an early opinion. ‘I knew you would soon grow tired of us. I said so from the beginning.’

‘Did you?’ in a curious tone.

‘Yes. It was not a very clever guess to make, was it? Why, there is literally nothing to be done down here, unless one farms or talks scandal of one’s neighbours, or——’

‘Or goes nutting, and puts one’s neck in danger,’ with a smile. ‘Surely there can be nothing tame about a place where such glorious exploits can be performed?’ Then, changing his manner: ‘You have described Puxley very accurately, I must confess; and yet, strange as it may appear to you, your opinion was rashly formed, because as yet I am not tired of either it or—you.’

‘And yet you find the time drag heavily?’

‘When spent at Strangemore—yes. Never when spent at Summerleas.’

I begin to think Dora has a decided chance. I search my brain eagerly for some more leading question that shall still further satisfy me on this point, but find nothing. Billy, who has been absent from us for some time, comes leisurely up to us. His presence recalls the hour.

‘We must be going now,’ I say, extending my hand; ‘it is getting late. Good-bye, Mr. Carrington—and thank you again very much,’ I add, somewhat shyly.

‘If you persist in thinking there is anything to be grateful for, give me my reward,’ he says, quickly, ‘by letting me walk with you to the boundary of the wood.’

‘Yes, do,’ says Billy, effusively. Still Mr. Carrington looks at me, as though determined to take permission from my eyes alone.

‘Come, if you wish it,’ I say, answering the unspoken look in his eyes, and feeling thoroughly surprised

to hear a man so altogether grown-up express a desire for our graceless society. Thus sanctioned, he turns and walks on by my side, conversing in the pleasant, light, easy style peculiar to him, until the boundary we named is reached. Here we pause to bid each other once more good-bye.

‘And I may come to-morrow?’ he asks, holding my hand closely.

‘Yes—but—but I cannot give you the handkerchief before mamma and Dora,’ I murmur, blushing hotly.

‘True. I had forgotten that important handkerchief. But perhaps you could manage to walk with me as far as the entrance-gate, could you?’

‘I don’t know,’ I return, doubtfully. ‘If not, I can give it to you some other day.’

‘So you can. Keep it until I am fortunate enough to meet you again. I shall probably get on without it until then.’

So, with a smile and a backward nod and glance, we part.

For some time after he has left us Billy and I move on together without speaking—a most unusual thing—when I break the silence by my faltering tones—

‘Billy,’ I say, trembling with hope and fear, ‘Billy, tell me the truth. That time—you know—did I show very much of my leg?’

‘Not more than an inch or two above the garter,’ he answers, in an encouraging tone, and for a full minute I feel that with cheerfulness I could attend the funeral of my brother Billy.

I am mortified to the last degree. Unbidden tears rise to my eyes. Even though I might have known a more soothing answer to be false, still with rapture would I have hailed it. There is a brutal enjoyment of the scene in his whole demeanour that stings me sorely. I begin to compare dear Roly with my younger brother in a manner highly unflattering to the latter. If Roland had been here in Billy’s place to-day—instead



of being as he always is with that tiresome regiment in some forgotten corner—all might have been different. *He* at least, being a *man*, would have felt for me. How could I have been mad enough to look for sympathy from a *boy*?

*Dear* Roland! The only fault *he* has is his extreme and palpable selfishness. But what of that? Are not *all* men so afflicted? Why should *he* be condemned for what is only to be expected and looked for in the grander set? What I detest more than anything else is a person who, while professing to be friends with one, only——

I grow morose, and decline all further conversation, until we come so near our home that but one turn more hides it from our view.

Here Billy remonstrates——

‘Of course you can sulk if you like,’ he says, in an injured tone, ‘and not speak to a fellow—all for nothing; but you can’t go into the house with your arm like that, unless you wish them to discover the battle in which you have been engaged.’

I hesitate, and look ruefully at my arm. The sleeve of my dress is rolled up above the elbow, having refused obstinately to come down over the bandage, and consequently I present a dishevelled, not to say startling, appearance.

‘I must undo it, I suppose,’ I return, disinclination in my tone; and Billy says ‘Of course’ with hideous briskness. Therewith he removes the guarding pin and proceeds to unfold the handkerchief with an air that savours strongly of pleasurable curiosity, while I stand shrinking beside him, and vowing mentally never again to trust myself at an undue distance from mother earth.

At length the last fold is undone, and to my unspeakable relief I see that the wound, though crimson round the edges, has ceased to bleed. Hastily and carefully drawing the sleeve of my dress over it, I

thrust the stained handkerchief into my pocket and make for the house.

When I have exchanged a word or two with Dora (who is always in the way when not wanted—that being the hall at the present moment) I escape upstairs without being taken to task for my damaged garments, and carefully lock my door. Nevertheless, though now, comparatively speaking, in safety, there is still a weight upon my mind. If to-morrow I am to return the handkerchief to its owner, it must in the meantime be washed; and who is to wash it?

Try as I will I cannot bring myself to make a confidante of Martha; therefore nothing remains but for me to undertake the purifying of it myself. I have still half an hour clear before the dinner-bell will ring; so plunging my landlord's cambric into the basin, I boldly commence my work.

Five minutes later. I am getting on; it really begins to look almost white again; the stains have nearly vanished, and only a general pinkiness remains. But what is to be done with the water?—if left, it will surely betray me, and betrayal means punishment.

I begin to feel like a murderess. In every murder case I have ever read—(and they have a particular fascination for me)—the miserable perpetrator of the crime finds a terrible difficulty in getting rid of the water in which he has washed off the traces of his victim's blood. I now find a similar difficulty in disposing of the water reddened by my own. I open the window, look carefully out, and, seeing no one, fling the contents of my basin into the air. 'It falls to earth I know not where' as I hurriedly draw in my head and get through the remainder of my self-imposed duty.

After that my dressing for dinner is a scramble; but I get through it in time, and come down serene and innocent, to take my accustomed place at table.

All goes well until towards the close of the festivities, when papa, fixing a piercing eye on me, says generally—

‘May I enquire which of you is in the habit of throwing water from your bedroom windows upon chance passers-by?’

A ghastly silence follows. Dora looks up in meek surprise. Billy glances anxiously at me. My knees knock together. Did it fall upon *him*? Has he discovered all?

‘Well! why do I receive no answer? *Who* did it?’ demands papa, in a voice of suppressed thunder, still with his eye on me.

‘I threw some out this evening,’ I acknowledge, in a faint tone, ‘but never before—I——’

‘Oh! it was *you*, was it?’ says papa, with a glare. ‘I need scarcely have enquired; I might have known the one most likely to commit a disreputable action. Is that an established habit of yours? Are there no servants to do your bidding? It was the most monstrous proceeding I ever in my life witnessed.’

‘It was only——’ I begin, timidly.

‘“It was only” that it is an utterly impossible thing for you ever to be a lady,’ interrupts papa, bitterly. ‘You are a downright disgrace to your family. At times I find it a difficult matter to believe you a Vernon.’

Having delivered this withering speech, he leans back in his chair, with a snort that would not have done discredit to a war-horse, which signifies the scene is at an end. Two large tears gather in my eyes and roll heavily down my cheeks. They *look* like tears of penitence, but in reality are tears of relief. Oh! if that telltale water had but fallen on the breast of his shirt, or on his stainless cuffs, where *would* the enquiries have terminated?

Billy—who, I feel instinctively, has been suffering tortures during the past five minutes—now, through

the intensity of his joy at my escape, so far forgets himself as to commence a brilliant fantasia on the table-cloth with a dessert-fork. It lasts a full minute without interruption ;—I am too depressed to give him a warning glance. At length—

‘Billy, when you have quite done making that horrid noise, perhaps you will ring the bell,’ says Dora, smoothly, with a view to comfort. Certainly the tattoo *is* irritating.

‘When I have quite done I will,’ returns Billy, calmly, and continues his odious occupation, with now an addition to it in the form of an unearthly scraping noise, caused by his nails, that makes one’s flesh creep.

Papa, deep in the perusal of the *Times*, hears and sees nothing. Mother is absent.

‘Papa,’ cries Dora, whose delicate nerves are all unstrung, ‘will you send Billy out of the room, or else induce him to stop his present employment?’

‘William,’ says papa, severely, ‘cease that noise directly.’ And William, casting a vindictive glance at Dora, lays down the dessert-fork and succumbs.

## CHAPTER V.

I HAVE wandered down to the riverside and under the shady trees. As yet October is so young and mild the leaves refuse to offer tribute, and still quiver and rustle gaily on their branches.

It is a week since my adventure in the wood—five days since Mr. Carrington’s last visit. On that occasion, having failed to obtain one minute with him alone, the handkerchief still remains in my possession, and proves a very skeleton in my closet; the initials M.J.C.—that stand for Marmaduke John Carrington, as all the world knows—staring out boldly from their corner, and threatening at any moment to betray me; so that,

through fear and dread of discovery, I carry it about with me, and sleep with it beneath my pillow. Looking back upon it all now, I wonder how I could have been so foolish, so wanting in invention. I feel with what ease I could now dispose of anything tangible and obnoxious.

There is a slight chill in the air, in spite of the pleasant sun ; and I half make up my mind to go for a brisk walk, instead of sauntering idly, as I am at present doing, when somebody calls to me from the adjoining field. It is Mr. Carrington. He climbs the wall that separates us and drops into my territory, a little scrambling Irish terrier at his heels.

‘Is this a favourite retreat of yours?’ he asks as our hands meet.

‘Sometimes. Oh ! Mr. Carrington, I am so glad to see you to-day.’

‘Are you really? That is better news than I hoped to hear when I left home this morning.’

‘Because I want to return you your handkerchief. I have had it so long, and am so anxious to get rid of it. It—it would probably look nicer,’ I say, with hesitation, slowly withdrawing the article in question from my pocket, ‘if anybody else had washed it; but I did not want anyone to find out about—*that day*, so I had to do it myself.’

Lingeringly, cautiously, I bring it to light and hold it out to him. Oh ! how dreadfully pink and uncleanly it appears in the broad light of the open air ! To *me* it seems doubly hideous—the very last thing a fastidious gentleman would dream of putting to his nose.

Mr. Carrington accepts it almost tenderly. There is not the shadow of a smile upon his face. It would be impossible for me to say *how* grateful I feel to him for this.

‘Is it possible you took all that trouble?’ he says, a certain gentle light, with which I am growing familiar, coming into his eyes as they rest upon my

anxious face. 'My dear child, why? Did you not understand I was only jesting when I expressed a desire to have it again? Why did you not put it in the fire, or rid yourself of it in some other fashion long ago? So'—after a pause—'you *really* washed it with your own hands for me?'

'One might guess that by looking at it,' I answer, with a rather awkward laugh; 'still I think it would not look *quite* so badly, but that I kept it in my pocket ever since, and that gives it its crumpled appearance.'

'Ever since; so near to you for five long days? What a weight it must have been on your tender conscience! Well, at all events no *other* washerwoman'—with a smile—'shall ever touch it. I promise you that.' He places it carefully in an inside pocket as he speaks.

'Oh! please do not say that,' I cry, dismayed; 'you must not keep it as a specimen of my handiwork. Once properly washed, you will forget all about it; but if you keep it before your eyes in its present state——Mr. Carrington, *do* put it in your clothes-basket the moment you go home.'

He only laughs at this pathetic entreaty, and throws a pebble into the tiny river that runs at our feet.

'Why are you alone?' he asks presently. 'Why is not the indefatigable Billy with you?'

'He reads with a tutor three times a week. That leaves me very often lonely. I came here to-day just to pass the time until he can join me. He don't seem to care much about Greek and Latin,' I admit, ingenuously; 'and as he never looks at his lessons until five minutes before Mr. Caldwood comes, you see he don't get over them very quickly.'

'And so leaves you disconsolate longer than he need. Your sister—Miss Vernon—does she never go for a walk with you?'

Ah! now he is coming to Dora.

'Dora? Oh, never. She is not fond of walking; it

does not agree with her, she says. You may have noticed she is not very robust; she looks so fragile, so different to *me* in every respect.'

'Very different.'

'Yes, we all see that,' I answer, rather disconcerted by his ready acquiescence in this home view. 'And so pretty as she is too! Don't you think her very pretty, Mr. Carrington?'

'Extremely so. Even more than merely pretty. Her complexion, I take it, must be quite unrivalled. She is positively lovely—in her own style.'

'I am very glad you admire her; but indeed you would be singular if you did not do so,' I say, with enthusiasm. 'Her golden hair and her blue eyes make her quite a picture. I think she has the prettiest face I ever saw—don't you?'

'No; not the prettiest. I know another that, to me at least, is far more beautiful.'

He is looking straight before him, apparently at nothing, and to my attentive ear there is something hidden in his tone, that renders me uneasy for the brilliant future I have mapped out for my sister.

'You have been so much in the world,' I say, with some dejection, 'and of course in London and Paris and all the large cities one sees many charming faces from time to time. I should have remembered that. I suppose, away from this little village, Dora's face would be but one in a crowd.'

'It was not in London or Paris or any large city I saw the face of which I speak. It was in a neighbourhood as small—yes, *quite* as small as this. The owner of it was a mere child—a little country girl, knowing nothing of the busy world outside her home; but I shall never again see anyone so altogether sweet and lovable.'

'What was she like?' I ask curiously. I am not so uneasy as I was. If only a *child*, she cannot, of course, interfere with Dora. 'Describe her to me.'

‘What *is* she like, you mean. She is still in the land of the living. *Describe* her I don’t believe I could,’ says my companion, with a light laugh. ‘If I gave you her exact photograph in words I daresay I would call down your scorn on my benighted taste. Who ever grew rapturous over a description? If you cross-examine me about her charms without doubt I shall fall through. To my way of thinking beauty does not lie in feature, in hair, or eyes, or mouth. It is *there*, without one’s knowing why; a look, an expression, a smile, all go to make up the indescribable something that is perfection.’

‘You speak of her as though she were a woman—I don’t believe she is a child at all,’ I say, with a pout.

‘She is the greatest child I ever met. But tell me——’ Then breaking off suddenly, and turning to look at me: ‘By-the-by,’ he says, ‘what may I call you? Miss Vernon is too formal, and Miss Phyllis I detest.’

‘Yes,’ return I, laughing, ‘it reminds me of Martha. You may call me Phyllis if you like.’

‘Thank you; I shall like it very much. *A propos* of photographs, then, a moment ago, Phyllis, did you ever sit for your portrait?’ He is looking at me as he speaks, as though desirous of photographing me upon his brain without further loss of time.

‘Oh, yes, twice,’ I answer, cheerfully; ‘once by a travelling man who came round, and did us all very cheaply indeed (I think for fourpence or sixpence a head); and once in Carston. I had a dozen taken then; but when I had given one each to them all at home, and one to Martha, I found I had no use for the others, and had only wasted my pocket-money. Perhaps,’—diffidently—‘*you* would like one?’

‘*Like* it!’ says Mr. Carrington, with most uncalled-for eagerness, ‘I should rather think I would. Will you really give me one, Phyllis?’

‘Of course,’ I answer, with surprise; ‘they are no



use to me, and have been tossing about in my drawer for six months. Will you have a Carston one? I really think it is the best. Though, if you put your hand over the eyes, the itinerant's is rather like me.'

'What happened to the eyes?'

'There is a faint cast in the right one. The man said it was the way I always looked, but I don't think so myself. *You* don't think I have a squint, do you, Mr. Carrington?'

Here I open my blue-grey eyes to their widest and gaze at my companion in anxious enquiry.

'No, I don't see it,' returns he, when he has subjected the eyes in question to a close and lingering examination. Then he laughs a little, and I laugh too, to encourage him, and because at this time of my life gaiety of any sort seems good, and tears and laughter are very near to me; and presently we are both making merry over my description of the wanderer's production.

'What o'clock is it?' I ask, a little later. 'It must be time for me to go home, and Billy will be waiting.'

Having told me the hour, he says—

'Have you no watch, Phyllis?'

'No.'

'Don't you find it awkward now and then being ignorant of the time? Would you like one?'

'Oh, would I not!' I answer, promptly. 'There is nothing I would like better. Do you know it is the one thing for which I am always wishing.'

'Phyllis,' says Mr. Carrington, eagerly, 'let me give you one.'

I stare at him in silent bewilderment. Is he really in earnest? He certainly looks so; and for a moment I revel in the glorious thought. Fancy! what it would be to have a watch of my very own; to be able every five minutes to assure myself of the exact hour! Think of all the malicious pleasure I should enjoy in dangling

it before Dora's jealous eyes; what pride in exhibiting it to Billy's delighted ones! Probably it would be handsomer than Dora's, which has seen service; and, being newer, would surely keep better time.

Then the delight passes, and something within me whispers such joy is not for me. Of course he would only give it to me for Dora's sake, and yet I *know*—I cannot say *why* I feel it—but I *know* if I accepted a watch from Mr. Carrington all at home would be angry, and it would cause a horrible row.

'Thank you,' I say, mournfully. 'Thank you, *very*, *very* much, Mr. Carrington, but I could not take it from you. It is very kind of you to offer it, and I would accept it if I could, but it would be of no use. At home I know they would not let me have it, and so it would be a pity for you to spend all your money upon it for nothing.'

'What nonsense!' impatiently. '*Who* would not let you take it?'

'Papa, mamma, everyone,' I answer, with deepest dejection. (I would so *much* have liked that watch! Why, *why* did he put the delightful but transient idea into my head?) 'They would all say I acted wrongly in taking it, and—and they would send it back to you again.'

'Is there anything else you would like, Phyllis, that I *might* give you?'

'No, nothing, thank you. I must only wait. Mother has promised me her watch upon my wedding morning.'

'You seem comfortably certain of being married, sooner or later,' he says, with a laugh that still shows some vexation. 'Do you ever think what *sort* of a husband you would like, Phyllis?'

'No; I never think of disagreeable things, if I can help it,' is my somewhat tart reply. My merry mood is gone; I feel in some way injured, and inclined towards snappishness. 'And from what *I* have seen of

husbands I think they are all, every one, each more detestable than the other. If I were an heiress I would never marry; but being a girl without a fortune, I suppose I must.'

Mr. Carrington roars.

'I never heard anything so absurd,' he says, 'as such mature sentiments coming from *your* lips. Why, to hear you talk, one might imagine you a town-bred young woman, one who has passed through the fourth campaign; but to *see* you—— You have learned your lesson uncommonly well, though I am sure you were never taught it by your mother. And how do you know that you may not lose your heart to a curate, and find yourself poorer after your marriage than before?'

'That I never will,' I return, decisively. 'In the first place, I detest curates, and in the next I would not be wife to a poor man, even if I adored him. I will marry a rich man, or I will not marry at all.'

'I hate to hear you talk like that,' says Mr. Carrington, gravely. 'The ideas are so unsuited to a little loving girl like you. Although I am positive you do not mean one word of what you say, still it pains me to hear you.'

'I *do* mean it,' I answer, defiantly; 'but as my conversation pains you I will not inflict it on you longer. Good-bye!'

'Good-bye, you perverse child; 'and don't try to *imagine* yourself mercenary. Are you angry with me?' holding my unwilling hand and smiling into my face. 'Don't; I'm not worth it. Come, give me one smile to bear me company until we meet again.' Thus adjured I laugh, and my fingers grow quiet in his grasp. 'And when will that be?' continues Mr. Carrington. 'To-morrow or next day? Probably Friday will see me at Summerleas. In the meantime, now we are friends again, I must remind you not to forget your promise about that Carston photo.'

'I will remember,' I say; and so we separate.

## CHAPTER VI.

ON my return home, to my inexpressible surprise and delight, I find Roland. During my absence he has arrived, totally unexpected by any member of the household; and the small excitement his appearance causes makes him doubly welcome, as anything that startles us out of our humdrum existence is hailed with positive rapture. Even mother, whose mind is still wonderfully fresh and young, considering all the years she has passed under papa's thumb, enters freely into the general merriment, and forgets for the time being her daily cares.

'You see I found I would be here almost as soon as a letter,' explains Roland; 'and as I hate writing like a nightmare I resolved to take you a little by surprise.'

Mother, radiant, is sitting near him, regarding him with humid eyes. If dear mother had been married to an indulgent husband she would have been a dreadful goose. Even as it is she possesses a talent for weeping upon all occasions only to be equalled by mine.

'How did you manage to get away so soon again, Roly?' I ask, when I have embraced him as much as he will allow.

'I hardly know. Luck, I fancy—and the Colonel—did it. The old boy, you see, has a weakness for me, which I return by having a weakness for the old boy's daughter. Mother'—languidly—'may I marry the old boy's daughter? She is an extremely pretty little girl, young, with 15,000*l.*; but I would not like to engage myself to her without your full consent.'

Mother laughs, and passes her hand with a light caressing gesture over his charming face.

'Conceited boy!' she murmurs, fondly; 'there is little chance you will ever do so much good for yourself.'

‘Don’t be too sure. At all events I have your consent?’

‘Yes, and my blessing too,’ says mother, laughing again.

‘Thanks. Then I’ll turn it over in my mind when I go back.’

‘Roly,’ I break in, with my accustomed graciousness, ‘what brought you?’

‘The train and an overpowering desire to see Dora’s young man.’

A laugh and a blush from Dora.

‘I met him just now,’ I say, ‘down by the trout-river. What a pity he did not come home with me, to satisfy your curiosity without delay!’

‘Mother, do you think it the correct thing for Phyllis to keep clandestine appointments with her brother-in-law? Dora, is it possible you do not scent mischief in the air? A person, too, of Phyllis’s well-known attractions——’

‘What was he doing at the trout-river?’ asks Dora, with a smile. She is too secure in the knowledge of her own beauty to dread a rival anywhere, least of all in *me*.

‘Nothing, as far as I could see. He talked a little, and said he was coming here next Friday.’

‘The day after to-morrow. I shall ask him his intentions,’ says Roly. ‘It is most fortunate I am on the spot. One should never let an affair of this kind *drag*. It will doubtless be a thankless task; but I make a point of never shirking duty; and when we have put our beloved father comfortably underground——’

‘Roland!’ interrupts mother, in a shocked tone. There is a pause.

‘I quite thought you were going to say something,’ says Roland, amiably. ‘I was mistaken. I will therefore continue. When we have put our beloved father well under the ground I will then be head of this house, and natural guardian to these poor dear girls; and,

with this prospect in view, I feel even at the present moment a certain responsibility, that compels me to look after their interests, and bring this recreant gallant to book.'

'Roland, my dear, I wish you would not speak so of your father,' puts in mamma, feebly.

'Very well, I won't,' returns Roly, 'and he shan't be put underground at all if you don't wish it. Cremation shall be his fate, and we will keep his precious ashes in an urn.'

'I don't believe Mr. Carrington cares a pin for Dora,' says Billy, irrelevantly. 'I think he likes Phyllis twice as well.' This remark, though intended to do so, does *not* act as a bombshell in the family circle; it is regarded as a mere flash in the pan from Billy, and is received with silent contempt. What could a boy know about such matters?

'I have a month's leave,' Roland informs us presently. 'Do you think in that time we could polish it all off—courtship, proposal, and wedding?' 'Though'—reflectively—'that would be a pity, as by putting off the marriage for a little while I might then screw another month out of the old boy.'

'Just so,' I answer approvingly.

'He is such a desirable young man in every way,' says mother, *à propos* of Mr. Carrington, 'so steady and well-tempered; and his house is really beautiful. You know it, Roland—Strangemore—seven miles from this?'

'I think it gloomy,' Dora says, quietly. 'When I—if I were to—that is——'

'What a charming virtue is modesty!' I exclaim, *sotto voce*.

'Go on, Dora,' says Roland, in an encouraging tone. 'When you marry Mr. Carrington what will you do then?'

'Of course I don't see the smallest prospect of it,' murmurs Dora, with downcast eyes; 'but if I were to become mistress of Strangemore I would throw more

light into all the rooms ; I would open up windows everywhere, and take down those heavy pillars.'

'Then you would ruin it,' I cry, indignantly ; 'its ancient appearance is its chief charm. You would make it a mere modern dwelling-house ; and the pillars I think magnificent !'

'I don't,' says dear Dora, immovably ; 'and if ever I get the chance I will certainly remove them.'

'You won't get the chance, then—you need not think it. Mr. Carrington has not the smallest idea of marrying you,' exclaims Billy, whose Latin and Greek have evidently disagreed with him.

'It is a pity your tutor cannot teach you to be a gentleman,' retorts Dora, casting a withering glance at our youngest-born.

'Our dear William's temper appears slightly ruffled,' remarks Roland, smoothly. 'Evidently the gentleman of the name of Caldwood was lavish with his birch this morning. Come with me, Phyllis, I want to visit the stables.'

I follow him gladly ; and Billy joining us, with a grim countenance, we sally forth, leaving Dora to pour her griefs into mother's gentle bosom.

## CHAPTER VII.

FRIDAY brings Mr. Carrington, who is specially agreeable, and devotes himself a good deal to Roland. There is a considerable amount of talk about shooting, hunting, and so forth, and we can all see that Roly is favourably impressed. Dora's behaviour is perfect—her modesty and virtuous bashfulness apparent. Our visitor rather affects her society than otherwise, but, beyond listening to her admiringly when she speaks, shows no marked attention. In the country a visit is indeed a visitation, and several hours elapse before he takes his departure.

Once finding myself alone with him in the conservatory, I bestow upon him my promised picture, which he receives with open gratitude and consigns to his pocket as he hears footsteps approaching.

Roland's presence has inspired us all with much additional cheerfulness. We have never appeared so gay, so free from restraint as on this afternoon, and Mr. Carrington finds it hard to tear himself away. I myself am in wild spirits, and quite outshine myself every now and then; and Billy, who is not at any time afflicted with shyness, thinks it a safe opportunity to ask our friend before he leaves if he will some day take us for a drive in his dog-cart.

'Of course I will,' says Mr. Carrington. 'How unpardonable of me never to have thought of it before! But, perhaps,' speaking to Billy, but looking at Dora and me, 'perhaps you would prefer four horses and the coach? It will be a charity to give it a chance of escape from the moths.'

'Oh! I say,' says Billy, 'are you in earnest?' and being reassured on this point, fairly overflows with delight.

Dora and I are scarcely less delighted, and Roland is graciously pleased to say it will be rather fun, when he finds the two Hastings girls are also coming. Somehow nobody thinks of a chaperon, which certainly heightens the enjoyment, and proves what a reputable person Mr. Carrington must be.

When the day arrives, and our landlord, clad in a thick light overcoat, drives his four bright bays up to our door, our enthusiasm reaches its final pitch. Imagination can no farther go—our dream is fulfilled.

Mr. Carrington helps Dora carefully to the box-seat, and then springs up beside her. Billy and I sit very close to each other. Roland takes his place anywhere, with a view to changing it on the arrival of Miss Lenah Hastings. The whip crackles, the bays throw up their heads—we are off!



I kiss my hand a hundred times to mamma and Martha and Jane, the cook, who have all come out to the doorsteps to see the start; while Brewster at the corner of the house stands agape with excited surprise. Not that he need have shown astonishment of any sort, considering our expedition and the manner of it has been ceaselessly dinned into his ears every hour of the day during the past week by the untiring Billy.

At Rylston we take up the Hastings, and their brother, a fat but well-meaning young man, who plants himself on my other side, and makes elephantine attempts at playfulness. I do not mind him in the least; I find I can pour out my superfluous spirits upon him quite as well as upon a more companionable person—perhaps better; for with him at least I have all the conversation to myself. So I chatter, and laugh and talk at Mr. Hastings until I reduce him to a comatose state, leaving him all eyes and little tongue.

I have succeeded in captivating his fancy, however, or else it is his usual mode to devote himself for the entire day to whoever may first happen to fall into his clutches; as, when we descend at Carlton Wood to partake of the lunch our host has provided for us, he still clings to me, and outwardly at least is almost lover-like.

Alas! that October days should be so fleet. A day such as this one might have had forty hours without bringing *ennui* to any of us; but at length evening closes in—the time is come when we must take our departure. Regretfully we collect our shawls and move towards the drag.

Mr. Hastings, still adoring, scrambles on by my side, panting and puffing with the weight of the too-solid flesh nature has bestowed upon him and the wraps he is compelled to carry. Mr. Carrington, Dora, and Miss Hastings are close behind; Billy straggles somewhere in the distance; Roland and pretty Lenah follow more to the left.

Just as we reach the road Mr. Carrington speaks, and colours a little as he does so.

‘Miss Phyllis, I think I once heard you say you had never sat on the front of a drag—will you take it now? Miss Vernon agrees with me it is a good chance for you to see if you would like it.’

How good of him to remember that foolish speech of mine, when I know he is longing for Dora’s society!

‘Oh, thank you,’ I say, flushing; ‘it is very kind of you to think of it; but Dora likes it too, and I can assure you I was quite happy. I enjoyed myself immensely when coming.’

‘Oh! in that case——’ returns Mr. Carrington, coldly, half-turning away.

‘Not but that I would *like* it,’ I go on, encouraged by a smile from Dora, who can now afford to be magnanimous, having been made much of and singled out by the potentate during the entire day, ‘if you are sure (to Mr. Carrington) you wish it.’

‘Come,’ says he, with a pleased smile, and soon I find myself in the coveted position, our landlord in excellent temper beside me.

The horses, tired of standing, show a good deal of friskiness at the set-off, and claim their driver’s undivided attention, so that we have covered at least half a mile of the road before he speaks to me. Then stooping to tuck the rug more closely round me (the evenings have grown very chilly), he whispers, with a smile—

‘Are you *quite* sure you would rather be here with me than at the back with that “fat boy”?’

‘Quite positive,’ I answer, with an emphatic nod. ‘I was only afraid you would have preferred—you would regret—you would have liked to return as you came,’ I wind up desperately.

He stares at me curiously for a moment—almost with suspicion, as it seems to me, in the gathering twilight.

‘At this moment, believe me, I have no regrets, no troubles,’ he says at length, quietly. ‘Can you say the same? Did Hastings’ eloquence make no impression? I could not hear what particular line he was taking, but he looked unutterable things. Once or twice I thought he was going to weep. The melting mood would just suit a person of his admirable dimensions.’

‘He was very kind,’ I return, coldly, ‘and I don’t wish to hear him spoken of in a slighting manner. He is so attentive and good-natured; he carried all those wraps without a murmur, though I’m sure he did not like it, because his face got so red and he—he lost his breath so dreadfully as we came along. None of the others overburdened themselves, and *you*, I particularly noticed, carried nothing.’

‘I’m a selfish beast, I know,’ says Mr. Carrington, composedly, ‘and have always had a rooted objection to carrying anything, except perhaps a gun, and there is no getting out of that. There are so many disagreeable burdens in this life that *must* be borne, that it seems to me weak-minded voluntarily to add to them. Don’t scold me any more, Phyllis; I want to be happy while I can.’

‘Then don’t abuse poor Mr. Hastings.’

‘Surely it isn’t abuse to say a man is fat when he weighs twenty stone.’

‘It is impossible he can weigh more than fourteen,’ I exclaim, indignantly.

‘Well, even that is substantial,’ returns he, with a provoking air. Suddenly he laughs.

‘Don’t let us quarrel about Hastings,’ he says, looking down at me; ‘I will make any concessions you like rather than that. I will say he is slim, refined, a very skeleton, if you wish it, only take that little pucker off your forehead—it was never meant to wear a frown. Now tell me if you have enjoyed your day.’

‘Oh, so much! I say,’ with a sigh for the delights that are dead and gone. ‘You see we have never been

accustomed to anything but—but——’ I cannot bring myself to mention the disreputable fossil that lies in the coach-house at home, so substitute the words ‘one horse; and now to find one’s self behind four, with such a good height between one’s self and the ground, is simply bliss. I would like to drive like this for ever.’

‘May I take that as a compliment?’

‘“A compliment?”’

My stupidity slightly discomfits my companion.

‘I only hoped you meant you—you would have no objection to engage me as coachman in your never-ending drive,’ he says slowly. ‘My abominable selfishness again, you see. I cannot manage to forget Marmaduke Carrington.’ Then, abruptly: ‘You shall have the four-in-hand any day you wish, Phyllis, as it pleases you so much—remember that—just name a day whenever you choose, and I shall be only too happy to drive you.’

What a brother-in-law he will make! My heart throbs with delight. This day, then, is to be but one of a series! I feel a wild desire to get near Billy, to give him a squeeze in the exuberance of my joy; but in default of him can only look my gratitude by smiling rapturously into Mr. Carrington’s dark-blue eyes.

‘It is awfully good of you,’ I say, warmly; ‘you don’t know how much we enjoy it. We have always been so stupid, so tied down, any unexpected amusement like this seems almost *too* good to be true. But’—with hesitation and a blush—‘we had better not go too often. You see, papa, he is a little odd at times, and he might forbid it altogether if we appeared too anxious for it. Perhaps in a fortnight, if you would take us again—will you? Or would that be too soon?’

‘Phyllis, can’t you understand how much I wish to be with you?’ His tone is almost impatient, and he speaks with unnecessary haste. I conclude he is referring to pretty Dora, who sits behind, and is making mild running with Mr. Hastings.

‘Do you know,’ I say, confidentially, ‘I am so glad you have come to live down here. Before we had literally nothing to think about; now you are always turning up, and even that is something. Actually it seems to us, papa appears more lively since your arrival; he don’t look so gloomy or prowls about after us so much. And then this drive, we would never have had the chance of such a thing but for you. It is an immense comfort to know you are going to stay here altogether.’

‘Is it? Phyllis, look at me.’ I look at him. ‘Now, tell me this: if any other fellow as well off as I am had come to Strangemore, and had taken you for drives and that, would you have been as glad to know him? Would you have liked him as well as me?’

He is regarding me very earnestly; his lips are slightly compressed. Evidently he expects me to say something; but, alas! I don’t know what. I feel horribly puzzled, and hesitate.

‘Go on—answer me,’ he says eagerly.

‘I don’t know; I never thought about it,’ I murmur, somewhat troubled. ‘It is such an odd question. You see if he had come in your place I would not then have known you; and if he had been as kind—yes, I suppose I would have liked him just as well,’ I conclude, quickly.

Of course I have said the wrong thing. The moment my speech is finished I know this. Mr. Carrington’s eyes leave mine; he mutters something between his teeth, and brings the whip down sharply upon the far leader.

‘These brutes grow lazier every day,’ he says, with an unmistakable frown.

Five—six minutes pass, and he does not again address me. I feel annoyed with myself, yet innocent of having intentionally offended. Presently, stealing a glance at my companion, I say contritely—

‘Have I vexed you, Mr. Carrington?’

‘No, no,’ he answers, hastily, the smile coming home to his lips; ‘don’t think so. Surely truthfulness being so rare a virtue, should be precious. I am an irritable fellow at times, and you are finding out all my faults to-night, Phyllis,’ he says, rather sadly, laying his hand for an instant upon mine, as it lies bare and small and brown upon the rug. ‘You have proved me both ill-tempered and selfish. You will say I am full of defects.’

‘Indeed I will not,’ I return earnestly, touched by his manner; ‘I do not even see the faults you mention; and at all events no one was ever before so kind to me as you have been.’

‘I would be kinder if I dared,’ he says, somewhat unsteadily.

While I ponder on what these words may mean, while the first dim foreboding—suspicion—what you will—enters my mind, we reach Rylston, and pull up to give the Hastings time to alight and bid their adieux. Then we go on again, always in the strange silence that has fallen upon us, and presently find ourselves at home.

Mr. Carrington is on the ground in a moment, and comes round to my side to help me down. I hold out my hands and prepare for a good spring (a clear jump at any time is delightful to me); but he disappoints my hopes by taking me in his arms and placing me gently on the gravel; after which he goes instantly to Dora.

When we are all safely landed, papa, to our unmitigated astonishment, comes forward, and not only asks but presses Mr. Carrington to stay and dine. Perhaps, considering he has four horses and two grooms in his train, our father guesses he will refuse the invitation. At all events, he does so very graciously, and, raising his hat, drives off, leaving us free to surround and relate to mother all the glories of the day.

## CHAPTER VIII.

THE following Monday, as I sit reading in the small parlour we dare to call our own, I am startled by Dora's abrupt entrance. Her outdoor garments are on her; her whole appearance is full of woe; suspicious circles surround her eyes. I rise fearfully, and hasten towards her. Surely if anything worthy of condemnation has occurred it is impossible but I must have a prominent part in it. Has the irreproachable Dora committed a crime? Is she in disgrace with our domestic tyrant?

‘Dora, what has happened?’ I ask, breathlessly.

‘Oh, nothing,’ returns Dora, reckless misery in her tone; ‘nothing to signify—only—Billy was right—I am quite positive he never cared for me—has not the slightest intention of proposing to me.’

‘What? who?’ I demand, in my charming definite way.

‘Who?’ with impatient reproach. ‘Who is there in this miserable forgotten spot to propose to anyone, except—Mr. Carrington?’

‘What have you heard, Dora?’ I ask, light breaking in upon my obscurity.

‘Heard? Nothing. I would not have believed it if I had heard it. I saw with my own eyes. An hour ago I put on my things and went out for a walk, intending to go down by the river; but just as I came to the shrubberies, and while I was yet hidden from view, I saw Mr. Carrington and that horrid dog of his standing on the bank just below me. I hesitated for a moment about going forward. I didn't quite like,’ says Dora, modestly, ‘to force myself upon him for what would look so like a *tête-à-tête*; and while I waited, unable to make up my mind, he’—a sob—‘took out of his waistcoat a large gold locket and

opened it, and '—a second heavy sob—' and after gazing at it for a long time, as though he were going to eat it'—a final sob, and an inclination towards choking—'he stooped and kissed it. And, oh! of course it was some odious woman's hair or picture or something,' cries Dora, breaking down altogether, and sinking with rather less than her usual grace into the withered arm-chair that adorns the corner of our room.

A terrible suspicion, followed by as awful a sense of conviction, springs to life within me. The word 'picture' has struck an icy chill to my heart. Can it by any possibility be my photograph he has been so idiotically and publicly embracing? Am I the fell betrayer of my sister's happiness?

A moment later I almost smile at my own fears. Is it likely any man, more especially one who has seen so much of the world as Mr. Carrington, would find anything worth kissing in my insignificant countenance? I find unlimited consolation in this reflection, that at another time would have caused me serious uneasiness.

Meantime Dora is still giving signs of poignant anguish, and I look at her apprehensively, while pondering on what will be the most sympathetic thing to say or do under the circumstances.

Her nose is growing faintly pink, large tears are standing in her eyes, her head inclines a little—a very little—to one side.

Now, when I cry I do it with all my heart. The tears fall like rain; for the time being I abandon myself altogether to my grief, and a perfect deluge is the consequence. Once I have wept my full, however, I recover almost instantaneously, feeling as fresh as young grass after a shower.

Not so with Dora. When she is afflicted the tears come one by one, slowly, decorously sailing down her face; each drop waits politely until the previous one has cleared off the premises before presuming to follow



in its channel. She never sniffs or gurgles or makes unpleasant noises in her throat ; indeed, the entire performance—though perhaps monotonous after the first—is fascinating and ladylike in the extreme. In spite of the qualms of conscience that are still faintly pricking me, as I sit mutely opposite my suffering sister, I find myself reckoning each salt drop as it rolls slowly down her cheek. Just as I get to the forty-ninth Dora speaks again—

‘If he really is in love with somebody else—and I can hardly doubt it after what I have seen—I think he has behaved very dishonourably to me,’ she says, in a quavering tone.

‘How so?’ I stammer, hardly knowing what to say.

‘How so!’ with mild reproof. ‘Why, what has he meant by coming here day after day, and sitting for hours in the drawing-room, and bringing flowers and game, unless he had some intentions with regard to me? Only that you are so dull, Phyllis, you would not require me to say all this.’

‘It certainly looks very strange,’ I acknowledge. ‘But perhaps, after all, Dora, you are misjudging him. Perhaps it was his sister’s—Lady Handcock’s—hair he was kissing.’

‘Nonsense!’ says Dora, sharply ; ‘don’t be absurd. Did you ever hear of any brother wasting so much affection upon a sister? Do you suppose Billy or Roland would keep *your* face or hair in a locket to kiss and embrace in private?’

I certainly cannot flatter myself that they would, so give up this line of argument.

‘Perhaps the person, whoever she is, is dead,’ I suggest, more brilliantly.

‘No. He smiled at it quite brightly, as one would never smile at a dead face. He smiled at it as if he *adored* it,’ murmurs Dora, hopelessly, and the fiftieth drop splashes into her lap. ‘I shall tell papa,’ she

goes on presently. 'I have no idea of letting him be imagining things when there is no truth in them. I wish we had never seen Mr. Carrington. I wish with all my heart something would occur to take him out of this place. I feel as though I hated him,' says Dora, with unusual vehemence and a rather vicious compression of the lips; and, at all events, I hope he will never marry that woman in the locket.'

And I answer, 'So do I,' with rather suspicious haste, as in duty bound.

## CHAPTER IX.

It is the evening of the same day, and we are all seated in our accustomed places at the dinner-table; all, that is, except papa. It is such an unusual thing for *him* to be absent, once a bell has sounded summoning us to meals, that we are busy wondering what can be the matter, when the door is flung violently open, and he enters. It becomes instantly palpable to everyone of us that, in the words of the old song, 'sullen glooms his brow;' Billy alone, with his usual obtuseness, remaining dangerously unconscious of this fact.

Papa sits down in a snappish fashion and commences the helping process in silence. Mamma never sits at the head of her table except on those rare and unpleasant occasions when the neighbours are asked to dine. Not a word is spoken: deadly quiet reigns, and all is going on smoothly enough, until Billy, unhappily raising his head, sees Dora's crimson lids.

'Why, Dora,' he exclaims instantly, in a loud and jovial tone, 'what on earth is the matter with you? Your eyes are as red as fire.'

Down goes Dora's spoon, up comes Dora's handkerchief to her face, and a stifled sob conveys the remainder of her feelings. It is the last straw.

‘William!’ cries my father, in a voice of thunder, ‘go to your room.’ And William does as he is bid.

The brown gravy-soup has not yet been removed; and Billy, being our youngest, and consequently the last helped, more than half of his allowance of that nutritious fluid still remains upon his plate. His going *now* means his being dinnerless for this day at least. A lump rises in my throat and my face flushes. For the moment I feel that I hate Dora and papa and my own soup; and, leaning back in my chair, suffer it to follow Billy’s.

I am almost on the verge of tears, when, happening to glance upwards, my eyes fall upon Roly’s expressive countenance. In his right eye is screwed the most enormous Butcher’s penny I ever beheld; his nose is drawn altogether to one side in a frantic endeavour to maintain it in its precarious position; his mouth likewise; his left orb is firmly fixed upon our paternal parent.

I instantly become hysterical. An awful fear that I am going to break into wild laughter seizes hold of me. I grow cold with fright, and actually gasp with fear, when mother (who always knows by instinct, dear heart, when we are on the brink of disgrace) brings her foot heavily down on mine, and happily turns the current of my thoughts. She checks me just in time; I wince, and withdrawing my fascinated gaze from Roly’s penny, fix my attention on the tablecloth, while she turns an agonised look of entreaty upon her eldest hope; but, as his only available eye is warily bent on papa, nothing comes of it.

There is an accountable delay after the soup has been removed. Can Billy have been adding to his evil-doing by any fresh misconduct? This idea is paramount with me as I sit staring at the house linen, though all the time in my brain I see Roland’s copper regarding me with gloomy attention.

The silence is becoming positively awful, when

papa suddenly raises his head from the contemplation of his nails, and Roland, sweeping the penny from his eye with graceful ease, utters a languid sigh, and says mildly—

‘Shall we say grace?’

‘What is the meaning of this delay?’ demands papa, exploding for the second time. ‘Are we to sit here all night? Tell cook if this occurs again she can leave. Three-quarters of an hour between the soup and fish is more than I will put up with. If there is no more dinner let her say so.’

‘Perhaps Mrs. Tully is indisposed,’ says Roly, politely, addressing James. ‘If so, we ought to make allowances for her.’ Mrs. Tully’s admiration for ‘Old Tom’ being a well-known fact to everyone in the house except papa.

‘Be silent, Roland; I will have no interference where my servants are concerned,’ declares papa, and exist James, with his hand to his mouth, to return presently with a very red face and the roast mutton.

‘Where’s the fish?’ asks papa, in a terrific tone.

‘It didn’t arrive in time, sir.’

‘Who has the ordering of dinner in this house?’ enquires papa, addressing us all generally, as though ignorant of the fact of mother’s having done so without a break for the last twenty-six years. ‘*Nobody*, I presume, by the manner in which it is served. Now, remember, James, I give strict orders that no more fish is ever taken from that fishmonger. Do you hear?’

‘Yes, sir.’ And at length we all get some roast mutton.

It seems to me that dinner will never come to an end; and yet to watch me, I feel sure no stranger would ever guess at my impatience. Experience has taught me that any attempt at hurry will betray me, and produce an order calculated to prevent my seeing Billy for the entire evening. I therefore smother my feelings, break my walnuts, and get through my claret

with a great show of coolness. Claret is a thing I detest; but it pleases papa to form our tastes, which means condemning us to eat and drink such things as are nauseous and strictly distasteful to us.

At length, however, the welcome word is spoken, and we rise from the table. Once outside the door, I fly to cook; and having obtained such delicacies as are procurable, rush upstairs, and enter Billy's room—to find him seated at the farthest end, the deepest look of dejection upon his features.

As our eyes meet this gloom vanishes, giving place to an expression of intense relief.

‘Oh!’ he says, ‘I thought you were Dora.’

‘No. I could not come sooner, as papa fought over every course. But I have brought you your dinner now, Billy. You must be starving.’

‘I have it long ago,’ says Billy, drawing a potato from his pocket and a plate from under the dressing-table, on which mutton is distinctly visible. I feel rather disappointed.

‘Who brought it to you?’ I ask; but before I can receive a reply a heavy step upon the stairs strikes terror to our hearts.

Instantly Billy's dinner goes under the table again, and the dejected depression returns to his face. But I—what am I to do? Under the bed I dive, plate and all—thrusting the plate on before me—and am almost safe, when I tip over a bit of rolled carpet and plunge forward, bringing both hands into the gravy. In this interesting position I remain, trembling, and afraid to stir or breathe, with my eyes directed through a small hole in the valance.

The door opens noisily, and—enter Roly with a cane in his hand and a ferocious gleam in his eyes.

‘Oh, Roly!’ I gasp, scrambling out of my hiding-place, ‘what a fright you gave us! We were sure it was papa.’

‘Where on earth have you come from?’ asks Roly,

gazing with undisguised amazement at the figure I present. And—don't come any nearer—"paws off, Pompey"—what is the matter with your hands?'

'Oh, I had just brought up Billy some dinner, and when I heard you I ran under the bed and tripped over the carpet, and fell splash into the gravy. But it is nothing,' I wind up, airily.

'Nothing! I wish it was less. Go and wash yourself, you dirty child.' Then, resuming the ferocious aspect, and with uplifted cane, he advances on Billy.

'William'—imitating papa's voice to a nicety—'I have not yet done with you. What, sir, did you mean by exposing your sensitive sister to the criticisms of a crowded table? If your own gentlemanly instincts are not sufficiently developed to enable you to understand how unpardonable are personal remarks, let this castigation, that a sense of duty compels me to bestow, be the means of teaching you.'

Billy grins, and for the third time commences his dinner, while Roland leans against the window-shutter and contemplates him with lazy curiosity.

'Billy, he asks presently, 'is mutton—when the fat has grown white and the gravy is in tiny lumps—a good thing?'

'No, it aint,' returns Billy, grumpily, and with rather more than his usual vulgarity.

'I ask merely for information,' says Roly. 'It certainly *looks* odd.'

'It's *beastly*,' says Billy. 'If the governor goes in for any more of this kind of thing I'll cut and run; that's what I'll do.'

'Why didn't you have some dumpling?' Roland goes on, smoothly. 'The whipped cream with it was capital.'

'Dumpling!' says Billy, regarding me fixedly, 'dumpling! Phyllis, *was* there dumpling?'

'There was,' I reply.

'And whipped cream?'

‘Yes,’ I answer, faintly.

‘Oh, Phyllis!’ says Billy, in the liveliest tone of reproach.

The flicker of an amused smile shoots across Roland’s face.

‘Phyllis, why did you not bring him some?’ he asks, in a tone that reflects Billy’s.

‘How *could* I?’ I exclaim, indignantly. ‘I could not carry more than one plate; and even as it was the gravy was running all about. I was afraid every minute I would be caught. Besides——’

‘Miss Phyllis, Miss Phyllis,’ comes a sepulchral whisper at the door, accompanied by a faint knock. In the whisper I recognise James. Having taken a precautionary peep through the keyhole, I open the door, and on the threshold discover our faithful friend, a large plate of apples and cream in his hand, and a considerable air of mystery about him.

‘Miss Phyllis,’ he says, in a fine undertone, ‘cook sent this here to Master Billy; and the mistress says you are to come down at oncet, as the master has been asking where you all are.’

‘I am coming,’ I return; ‘and tell cook we are awfully obliged to her.’ Whereupon, having deposited the dainties before Billy, I charge downstairs and into the library; and having seized hold of the first book I can see, I collect myself and enter the drawing-room with a sedate air.

‘Where have you been?’ demands papa, twisting his head round until I wonder his neck doesn’t crack.

‘In the library, choosing a book.’

‘What book?’

I glance at the volume I carry, and to my unmitigated horror find it is a treatise on surgery.

‘It is by Dr. Batly,’ I murmur, vaguely.

‘Come here and let me see it.’ Trembling, I advance and surrender my book.

‘Is *this* a proper subject for a young woman to

study?’ exclaims papa, in high disgust, when he has read through the headings of the chapters. ‘What an abominable girl you are! Go over there and sit down, and keep yourself out of mischief for the remainder of the evening if you *can*.’

‘Would you like Tennyson’s “In Memoriam”?’ asks Dora, sweetly, raising her white lids for a moment to hold out to me an elegant little edition in green-and-gold.

‘No, thank you,’ I answer, curtly, and subsiding into my chair, sulk comfortably until bedhour.

## CHAPTER X.

THE next day Dora is still low—very low indeed—and sighs heavily at intervals. We might, however, in spite of this, have managed to knock some enjoyment out of our lives, but, unfortunately, whatever communication she has made to papa on the subject of Mr. Carrington’s treachery has had the effect of rendering him almost unbearable.

At breakfast the playfulness of his remarks can only be equalled by the sweetness of his expression; and by lunch hour he is so much worse that (as far at least as I am concerned) the food before me is as dust and ashes. I think Roland rather enjoys the murkiness of our atmosphere than otherwise, and takes a small but evident pleasure in winking at me as he presses the vinegar and pepper upon our already highly-seasoned father.

The latter, knowing my nomadic tendencies, is successful in bringing to light during the day a dozen unhemmed cambric handkerchiefs, and before going for his customary afternoon ride leaves strict injunctions behind him that by my fingers they are to be begun and ended before his return. About four o’clock, there-



fore, behold me sitting in state in the drawing-room, in company with mamma and Dora, hard at work at my enforced task.

The conversation is limited ; it dwindles, indeed, until it gets so sparse that at length we are ashamed of it and relapse into silence. Dora broods with tender melancholy upon her woes ; mother thinks of us ; while I, were I to give a voice to my thoughts, would demand of mother the name of the evil genius that possessed her when she walked to the altar with papa.

The needle runs into my finger—it does so pretty regularly after every fifth stitch, but this time it has got under my nail, and causes me for the moment keen anguish. I groan, and mutter something under my breath ; and mother says, ‘Phyllis, darling, be careful,’ in a dreamy tone. Surely we are more than ordinarily dull.

Suddenly there comes a rattle of horse’s hoofs upon the gravel outside. We raise our heads simultaneously and question each other by our looks. A little later and Mr. Carrington’s voice striking on our ears sets speculation at rest. Mamma glances furtively at Dora, and Dora breathes a faint sigh and blushes pale pink, while suffering an aggrieved expression to characterise her face.

A horrible thought comes into my head. Suppose—of *course* it is impossible—but *suppose* Mr. Carrington were to come in now, and in the course of conversation mention my photograph, what will not mother and Dora think ? What is to prevent their drawing a conclusion about what happened yesterday ? Although I do not in the least believe it *was* my picture Mr. Carrington was seen embracing, still the very idea that it *might* be, and that he might at any time speak of it, turns me cold. Something must be done, and that quickly. Without further hesitation I rise from my seat, put down my work, and make for the door. No one attempts to detain me, and in an instant I am in the hall, face to face with our visitor.

I lay my hand upon the front of his coat and whisper hurriedly—

‘Do not say a word about my picture—not a *word*. Do you understand?’ I have raised my face very close to his in my anxiety and shake him slightly, to emphasise my words.

‘I do,’ replies he, placing his hand over mine as it lies almost unconsciously upon his breast. ‘Of course I will not. But—why——’

‘Nothing,’ I say; ‘at least, only a fancy. Go now. I will tell you some other time.’

‘Phyllis, will you meet me at the oak tree to-morrow evening at five—at *four*?’ he asks, eagerly, detaining me as I seek to escape, and I say ‘Yes’ with impatient haste; and tearing my hand out of his, turn my back upon him and gladly disappear.

## CHAPTER XI.

‘At last! How late you are! I thought you were *never* coming,’ is Mr. Carrington’s somewhat impatient greeting next evening, as he advances to meet me from under the old oak tree. My cheeks are flushed with the rapidity of my walk; my breath rushes from me in short quick little gasps.

‘I was so busy I could not come a moment sooner. I would not be here at all but that I promised, and was afraid you would think me out of my senses yesterday,’ I say, laughing and panting.

‘I certainly thought you rather tragical, and have been puzzling my brains ever since to discover the cause. Now, tell it to me.’

‘If I do you will think me horribly conceited.’ I hesitate and blush, uneasily. For the first time it occurs to me that I have a very uncomfortable story to relate.

‘I will not,’ says Mr. Carrington, amiably.

‘Well, then, the fact is, down at the trout-river, the day before yesterday, somebody saw you kissing a picture in a locket, and I feared if you mentioned having *my* portrait they might—they take up such ridiculous fancies at home—they *might* think it was *mine*.’

‘Is it possible they would imagine anything so unlikely?’

‘Of *course*’—with eager haste—‘*I* know it was not, but they might choose to think differently; and besides, something has whispered to me two or three times since that perhaps I was wrong in giving my photograph to you at all. Was I?’ wistfully,

‘That is a hard question to ask *me*, Phyllis, who am so happy in the possession of it. I certainly do not think you were.’

‘Then you would see no harm in my giving my picture to anyone?’

‘Of course I do not say it would be right of you to go about giving it to every man you meet.’

‘No? Then why should I give it to you in particular? After all, I believe I was wrong.’

‘Oh, that is quite another thing altogether,’ says Mr. Carrington, biting his lip. ‘You have known me a long time; I may almost be considered an old friend. And besides, you can be quite sure that I will prize it as it deserves.’

‘That is saying very little,’ I return, gloomily. His reasoning seems to me poor and unsatisfactory. I begin to wish my wretched likeness back again in my untidy drawer.

‘But why are you so sure it was *not* your picture I was caught admiring the other day?’ asks Mr. Carrington presently, with an ill-suppressed smile.

‘Nonsense,’ I reply angrily. (I hate being laughed at.) ‘For what possible reason would you put *my* face into your locket? I *knew* you would think me vain

when I began, but I am *not*—and—and I am very sorry I took the trouble to explain it to you at all.’

‘Forgive me, Phyllis. I did not mean to offend you, and I do *not* think you vain. I was merely imagining what a fatuous fool I must have looked when discovered in the act you describe. But have you no curiosity to learn who it *really* was I was so publicly embracing?’

‘I *know*,’ I return, with a nod, ‘it was that little girl you told me of some time since—the village maiden, you remember, whose face was so dear to you. Am I not right?’

‘Quite right. What a capital guess you made!’

‘May I see her?’ I ask, coaxingly. ‘Do let me get just one little peep at her. I am sure she is lovely, from what you say; and I do so like pretty people!’

‘You would only be disappointed; and then you would say so, and I could not bear to hear one disparaging word said of my beauty.’

‘I will *not* be disappointed. Of course—you have had so much experience to guide you—your taste *must* be better than mine. Please let me see her.’

‘You promise faithfully not to scorn the face I will show you? You will say no slighting word?’

‘I will not indeed. How could you think I would be so rude?’

‘Very good.’ He raises his watch-chain and detaches from it a plain gold locket. I draw near and gaze at it eagerly. What will she be like, this rival of Dora’s?

‘Now, remember,’ he says again, while a look of intense amusement crosses his face, ‘you have promised to admire?’

‘Yes, yes,’ I answer, impatiently; and as he deliberately opens the trinket I lean forward and stare into the large grey-blue eyes of Phyllis Marian Vernon.

Slowly I raise my head and look at my companion.

He appears grave now, and rather anxious. I know I am as white as death.

‘So you have put *me* into a locket *too*,’ I say, in a low tone. ‘Why?’

‘Do not use the word “too,” Phyllis. You have no rival—I keep no woman’s face near me except yours.’

‘Then it was an untruth you told me about that girl?’

‘No, it was not. Will you not try to understand? You are that little girl—it was *your* face I kissed the other day down by the river. There is no face in the world I hold so dear as yours.’

‘Then you had no *right* to kiss it,’ I break out, indignantly, my surprise and bewilderment making me vehement. ‘I did not give you my picture to put in your locket and treat in that way. How dare you carry me all over the place with you—making things so unpleasant everywhere? And besides, you are talking very falsely—it is impossible that *anyone* could think *me* beautiful.’

‘I do,’ says he, gently. ‘I cannot help it. You know we all judge differently. And as to my kissing it, surely that was no great harm. It became mine, you know, when you gave it to me; and for me to kiss it now and then cannot injure you or it.’ He gazes down tenderly upon the face lying in his hand. ‘The Phyllis here does not look as if she could be unkind or unjust,’ he says, softly.

I am impressed by the mildness of his reproach. Insensibly I go closer to him, and regard with mingled feelings the innocent cause of all the disturbance.

‘It certainly looks wonderfully well,’ I say, with reluctance. ‘It never appeared to me so—ah—*passable* before. It must be the gold frame. Somehow—I never thought so until to-day—but now it seems much too pretty for me.’

‘Remember your promise,’ says Mr. Carrington, demurely: ‘to admire, and say no disparaging word.’

‘You laid a trap for me,’ I reply, smiling in spite of myself, and hard set to prevent the smile turning into a merry laugh, as I review the situation.

I lean my back against the old tree, and, clasping my hands loosely before me, begin to piece past events. I have not got very far in my meditations when I become aware that Mr. Carrington has closed the locket, has turned, and is steadfastly regarding me. My hat lies on the ground beside me: the wanton wind has blown a few stray tresses of my hair across my forehead. Involuntarily I raise my head until our eyes meet. Something new, indefinite, in his makes my heart beat with a sudden fear that yet is nameless.

‘Phyllis,’ whispers he, hurriedly, impulsively, ‘will you marry me?’

A long, long pause.

I am still alive, then—the skies have *not* fallen!

‘*What!*’ cry I, when I recover breath, moving back a step or two, and staring at him with the most open and undisguised amazement. *Can* I have heard aright? Is it indeed me he is asking to marry him? And if so—if my senses have not deceived me—who is to tell Dora? This thought surmounts all others.

‘I want you to say you will marry me,’ repeats he, rather disconcerted by the emphatic astonishment of my look and tone. As I make no reply this time he is emboldened, and advancing takes both my hands.

‘Why do you look so surprised?’ he says. ‘Why will you not answer me? Surely for weeks you must have seen I would some time ask you this question. Then why not to-day? If I waited for years I could not love you more utterly, more madly, if you like, than now. And you, Phyllis—say you will be my wife.’

‘I cannot indeed,’ I reply, earnestly; it is out of the question. I never knew you—you cared for me in this way—I always thought—that is, we all thought—you—

‘Yes?’

‘We were all quite sure—I mean we none of us imagined you were in love with *me*.’

‘With whom, then—with Dora?’

‘Well’—nervously—‘I am sure mamma and papa thought so, and so did I.’

‘What an absurd mistake! Ten thousand Doras would not make one Phyllis. Do you know ever since that first day I saw you in this wood I loved you? Do you remember it?’

‘Yes,’ I say, blushing furiously. ‘I was hanging from the nut-tree, and nearly went mad with shame and rage when I found I could not escape. It puzzles me to think what you could have seen to admire about me *that* day, unless my boots.’ I laugh rather hysterically.

‘Nevertheless I *did* love you then, and have gone on nursing the feeling ever since, until I can keep it to myself no longer. But you are silent, Phyllis. Why do you not speak? I *will* not remember what you said just now—I *will* not take a refusal from you. Darling, darling, surely you love me, if only a little?’

‘No, I do not love you,’ I answer, with downcast lids and flaming cheeks.

Silence falls upon my cruel words. His handclasp loosens, but still he does not let me altogether go; and glancing up timidly, I see a face like and yet unlike the face I know—a face that is still and white, with lips that tremble slightly beneath the heavy fair moustache. A world of disappointed anguish darkens his blue eyes.

Seeing all this, and knowing myself its cause, my heart is touched and a keen pang darts through my breast. I press his hands with reassuring force as I go on hastily—

‘But I *like* you, you will understand. I may not *love* you, but I *like* you very much indeed—better than any other man I ever met, except Roland and Billy, and *he* is only a boy.’ This is not a very clear or logical speech, but it does just as well—it brings the blood

back to his face, a smile to his lips, the light and fire to his eyes.

‘Are you sure of that?’ he asks, eagerly. ‘Are you certain, Phyllis?’

‘Quite sure. But then I have never seen any men except Mr. Mangan, you know, and the Curate, and Bobby de Vere, and—and one or two others.’

‘And these one or two others’—jealously—‘have I nothing to fear from them? Have you given *them* none of your thoughts?’

‘Not one,’ return I, smiling up at him. The smile does more than I intend.

‘Then you *will* marry me, Phyllis?’ cries he, with renewed hope. ‘If you *like* me as you say I will make you love me when you are once my own. No man could love as I do without creating some answering affection. Phyllis,’ he goes on, passionately, ‘look at me and say you believe all this. Oh, my life, my darling, how I have longed for you! How I have watched the hours that would bring me to your side! How I have hated the evenings that parted you from me! Say one little kind word to me to make me happy.’

His tone is so full of hope and joy that almost I feel myself drifting with the current of his passion. But Dora’s face rising before me checks the coming words. I draw back.

‘Phyllis, put me out of pain,’ he says, entreatingly.

I begin to find the situation trying, being a mere novice in the art of receiving and refusing proposals with propriety.

‘I—I don’t think I want to get married yet,’ I say at length, with nervous gentleness. I am very fearful of hurting him again. ‘At home, when I ask to go anywhere, they tell me I am still a child, and you are much older than me. I don’t mean that you are *old*,’ I add, anxiously, ‘only a good deal older than I am; and perhaps when it was too late you would repent the step you had taken and wish you had chosen a wife older and wiser.’



I stop, amazed at my own eloquence and rather proud of myself. Never before have I made so long and so connected a speech. Really the 'older and wiser' could scarcely have done better. The marrying in haste and repenting at leisure allusion appears to me very neat, and *ought* to be effective.

All is going on very well indeed, and I feel I could continue with dignity to the end, but that just at this moment I become conscious I am going to sneeze. Oh, horrible, unromantic thought! Will *nothing* put it back for ten minutes—for even *five*? I feel myself turning crimson, and certain admonitory twitchings in my nose warn me the catastrophe is close at hand.

'Of course,' says Mr. Carrington, in a low tone, 'I know you *are* very young'—(it is coming)—'only seventeen. And, and—(*surely* coming)—I suppose twenty-eight appears quite old to you.' (In another instant I shall be disgraced for ever). 'I look even older than I am. But, good gracious, Phyllis, is anything the matter with you?'

'Nothing, nothing,' I murmur, with a last frantic effort at pride and dignity, 'only a—a—snee—eeze—atchu—atchu—atchu!'

There is a most awful pause, and then Mr. Carrington, after a vain endeavour to suppress it, bursts into an unrestrained fit of laughter, in which without hesitation I join him. Indeed, now the crisis is over and my difficult and new-born dignity is a thing of the past, I feel much more comfortable and pleasanter in every way.

'But, Phyllis, all this time you are keeping me in suspense,' says Mr. Carrington presently, in an anxious tone; 'and I will not leave you again without a decided answer. The uncertainty kills me. Darling, I feel glad and thankful when I remember how happy I can make your life, if you will only let me. You shall never have a wish ungratified that is in my power to grant. Strangemore shall be yours, and you shall make what alterations there you choose. You shall have your own

rooms, and furnish them as your own taste directs. You shall reign there as the very sweetest queen that ever came within its walls.'

He has passed his arm lightly round my waist, and is keenly noting the effect of his words.

'I remember the other day you told me how you longed to visit foreign lands. I will take you abroad, and you shall stay there as long as you wish—until you have seen everything your fancy has pictured to you. You will like all this, Phyllis; it pleases you.'

There is no use in denying it. All this *does* please me. Nay, more, it intoxicates me. I am heart-whole, and can therefore freely yield myself up to the enjoyment of the visions he has conjured up before me. I feel I am giving in swiftly and surely. My refusing to marry him will not make him a whit more anxious to marry Dora; and instinct tells me now she is utterly unsuited to him. Still I am reluctant.

'Would you let me have Billy and mamma and Dora with me very often?' I ask, faintly. His arm round me tightens suddenly.

'As often as ever you wish,' he says, with strange calmness. 'I tell you you shall be my queen at Strange-more, and your wishes shall be law.'

'And'—here I blush crimson, and my voice sinks to a whisper—'there is something else I want very, very much. Will you do it for me?'

'I will. Tell me what it is.' His tone is so quiet, so kind, I am encouraged; yet I know by the trembling of the hand that holds mine that the quiet is enforced.

'Will you send Billy to Eton for me?' I say, my voice shaking terribly. 'I know it is a very great thing to ask, but he so *longs* to go.'

'I will do better than that,' he answers, softly, drawing me closer to him as he sees how soon I shall be his by my own consent. 'I will settle on you any money you wish, and *you* shall send Billy to Eton, and afterwards to Oxford or Cambridge.'

This assurance, given at any other time, under any other circumstances, would have driven me half-mad with delight. Now, though my heart feels a strong throb of pleasure, it is largely mingled with what I know is pain. Am I selling myself?

Some finer instinct within me whispers to me to pause before giving myself irrevocably to a man whom I certainly do not love as a woman should love the one with whom she elects to buffet all the storms and trials of life. A horrible thought comes to me and grows on my lips. I feel I *must* give it utterance.

‘Suppose,’ I say, suddenly, ‘suppose—afterwards—when I have married you, I see some one to love with all my heart and mind—what then?’

He shivers. He draws me passionately, almost fiercely to him, as though defying my miserable words to come true.

‘What put such a detestable idea into your head?’ he asks, hoarsely, with pale lips. ‘Are you trying to frighten me? Shall I tell you how *that* would end? You would be my murderess as surely as though you drove a knife into my heart. What an evil thought! But I defy it,’ he says, forcing a smile. ‘Once you are mine, once you belong to me altogether, I will hold you against yourself—against the world. Oh, Phyllis, my child, my *love*——’

He pauses, and, putting his hand under my chin, turns up my face until my head leans against his arm and my eyes look straight into his. His face is dangerously close to mine; it comes closer, closer, until suddenly, without a word of warning, his lips meet mine in a long eager passionate kiss.

It is the first time a lover’s kiss has been laid upon my lips. I do not struggle or seek to free myself. I only burst into a storm of tears. I am frightened, troubled, and lie trembling and sobbing in his arms, hardly knowing what I feel, hardly conscious of anything but a sense of shame and fear. I know, too,

that Marmaduke's heart is beating wildly against my cheek.

'Phyllis, what is it, what have I done?' he asks, very anxiously. 'My darling, was I too abrupt? Did I frighten you? Forgive me, sweet; I forgot what a mere timid child you are.'

I sob on bitterly.

'It shall not happen again; I promise you that. Phyllis, I will never kiss you again until you give me permission. Now surely you will forgive me. My darling, why should it grieve you so terribly?'

'I don't know,' I whisper, 'only I do not want to be married, or have a lover, or *anything*.'

Marmaduke lays his cheek very gently against mine, and for a long time there is silence between us. After a while my sobs cease, and he once more breaks the silence by saying—

'You will marry me, Phyllis?' and I answer, 'Yes,' very quietly, somehow feeling as if that kiss had sealed my fate and put it out of my power to answer 'No.'

'Then look at me,' says Marmaduke, tenderly. 'Will you not let me see my dear wife's face?'

I raise a face flushed and tear-stained and glance at him shyly for a moment. Evidently its dimmed appearance makes no difference to him, as there is unmistakable rapture and triumph in his gaze as he regards it. I hide it again, with a sigh, though now, the Rubicon being actually crossed, I feel a sense of rest I had not known before.

'Who is to tell them at home?' I ask presently.

'I will. Shall I go back with you now and tell them at once?'

'No, no,' I cry, hastily, shrinking from the contemplation of the scene that will inevitably follow his announcement. 'It is too late now. To-morrow—about four o'clock—you can come and get it over. And, Mr. Carrington, will you please be *sure* to tell

them I knew nothing of it—never suspected, I mean, that you *cared* for me?’

‘That I *loved* you? It would be a pity to suppress so evident a fact. Though how you could have been so blind, my pet, puzzles me. Well, then, to-morrow let it be. And now I will walk home with you, lest any hobgoblin jealous of my joy should spirit you away from me.’

Together and rather silently we go through the wood and out into the road beyond. I am conscious that every now and then Marmaduke’s eyes seek my face and dwell there with a smile in them that betrays his extreme and utter satisfaction. As for me, I am neither glad nor sorry, nor anything; but rather fearful of the consequences when my engagement shall be made public in the home circle. As yet my marriage is a thing so faint, so far away in the dim distance, that it causes me little or no annoyance.

Suddenly I stop short in the middle of the road and burst into irrepressible laughter.

‘What is it?’ asks Mr. Carrington, who is smiling in sympathy.

‘Oh, that sneeze!’ I say, when I can speak, ‘coming just in the middle of your proposal. Could anything have been so unsuitable, so utterly out of place? That odious little convulsion! I shall always think of the whole scene with abhorrence.’

‘Suppose I propose to you all over again?’ suggests Mr. Carrington. ‘It is impossible you can bring it in so unfortunately a second time; and you can then recollect the important event with more complaisance.’

‘No, no. A second edition would be flat, stale, and unprofitable; and, besides, it does not really matter, does it? Only I suppose it would be more correct to feel grave and tearful, instead of comical, on such occasions.’

‘*Nothing* matters,’ exclaims Marmaduke, fervently, seizing my hand and kissing it, ‘since you have pro-

misled to be my wife. And soon, Phyllis—is it not so?’

‘Oh, no; *certainly* not *soon*,’ I return, decidedly. ‘There is plenty of time. There is no hurry; and I do not want to be married for *ever* so long.’

My lover’s countenance falls.

‘What do you mean by “ever so long”?’ he asks.

‘Two or three years, perhaps.’

‘Phyllis! how can you be so unreasonable, so *absurd*?’ says he, his face flushing. ‘*Two years*! It is an eternity. Say six months, if you will; though even *that* is a ridiculous delay.’

‘If you talk like that,’ I say, stopping to stare fixedly at him, ‘I will not marry you at all. We had better decide the question at once. If you mean to say you think seriously I will marry you in *six months*, all I can say is, you are very much mistaken. I would not marry the Prince of Wales in six months—so *there*! If you once mention the subject to papa, and he discovers I do not wish to be hurried into the marriage, I have no doubt he will insist on my becoming a bride in *six days*. But rather than submit to any tyranny in the matter I would run away and *drown* myself.’

I utter this appalling threat with every outward demonstration of seriousness. Really the last hour has developed in a wonderful manner my powers of conversation.

‘Do you suppose,’ cries Marmaduke, with much indignation, ‘I have any desire to *force* you into anything? You may rest assured I will never mention the subject to your father. What do you take me for? You shall do just as you think fit. But, Phyllis, *darling*’—very tenderly—‘won’t you consider *me* a little? Remember how I shall be longing for you, and how unhappy will be every day spent away from you. Oh, darling, you cannot comprehend how every thought of my heart is wrapped up in you—how passionate and devoted is my love.’

He looks so handsome, so much in earnest as he says this, with his face flushed and his dark eyes alight, that I feel myself relenting. He sees his advantage and presses it.

‘You won’t be cruel, darling, will you? Remember you have all the power in your own hands. I would not if I could compel you to marry me a day sooner than you wish. And, Phyllis, will you not try to think it is for your happiness as well as for mine? In time you will learn to love me as well—no, *that* would be impossible—but almost as well as I love you. The entire devotion of a man’s life *must* meet with some return; and I swear it shall not be my fault if every hour you spend is not happier than the last. Speak, Phyllis, and say you will come to me in——’

‘A year,’ I interrupt, hastily. ‘Yes, that is a great concession; I said *three* years first, and now by a word I take off two. That is twenty-four long months. *Think* of it. You cannot expect more.’

‘It will *never* pass,’ says Marmaduke, desperately.

‘It will pass all too soon,’ say I, with a heavy sigh.

## CHAPTER XII.

ALL that evening and all the next day I creep about as one oppressed with sin. As the hour approaches that shall lay bare my secret I feel positively faint, and heartily wish myself in my grave. I am as wretched as though some calamity had befallen me; and verily I begin to think it has. With what intense longing do I wish undone all that happened yesterday!

Almost as the hall-clock, with its customary uncouthness, clangs out four strokes, Mr. Carrington rides up to the door. As I sit in an upper chamber—like Elaine, but with what different emotions!—watching my lover’s coming, I can see he is looking oppressively

radiant, and is actually whistling. I begin to hate him. How detestable a man looks when whistling! *Plough-boys whistle!*

He knocks a loud, determined, and, as it seems to me in my morbid fright, a triumphant knock at the door, and rings the bell until it sends forth a merry peal that echoes through the passages. A funny empty sensation comes into the tops of my fingers and across my forehead, as though the blood was receding, and, rising swiftly, I hurry to my own room and lock the door.

*Now* he is in the hall, and Billy and he are laughing—at some stupid joke, no doubt. *Now* he is in the library; *now* he has told papa it is a fine day; and *now* it must be all over!

I am too frightened to cry. Half an hour, an hour go by. I long yet fear to open the door. Another quarter of an hour elapses, and then mother's step comes slowly along the corridor outside.

‘Phyllis, are you within? Open the door.’

It is mother's voice, but it sounds strangely cold. I open to her, and present a white and woebegone face to her inspection. She comes in and comforts me for a moment silently. Then she speaks.

‘Phyllis, I never thought you deceitful,’ she says as severely as it is in her to say anything, and with a look of reproach in her dear eyes that cuts me to the heart.

‘Mother,’ I cry passionately, ‘don't look at me like that. Indeed, indeed I am not deceitful. I knew nothing about it when he asked me yesterday to marry him. I was a great deal more surprised than even *you* are now. I always thought it was Dora (and I wish with all my heart it *was* Dora); but though I refused him at first, he said so much afterwards that I was induced to give in. Oh, mother, won't you believe me?’

‘But you must have met him many times, Phyllis, before he asked you in marriage—many times of which we knew *nothing*.’

‘I did not indeed. Whenever I saw him I told you



—except once, a long time ago, when we met in the wood, with Billy. But I was climbing a nut-tree that day, and was afraid to say anything of it, lest I should get into disgrace. And then we went for that drive; and two or three times we met here, and that was all. I am sure I don't know what made him fall in love with *me*, and Dora so much prettier and more charming in every way. I don't believe he knows himself.'

'It is certainly most extraordinary,' says mother, 'and, I must add, very unfortunate. You will acknowledge it looks suspicious. Your father is much disturbed about it; and I really think Dora's heart must be broken, she is crying so bitterly. If we had not all made up our minds so securely about Dora it would not be so bad; but she was sure of it. And his visits here were so frequent. I really do think he has behaved very badly.'

'It was a mistake altogether,' I murmur, feebly.

'Yes, and a most unhappy one. I am sure I don't know what *is* to be done about Dora. She insists upon it that you secretly encouraged and took him away from her; and your father appears to sympathise with her.'

'That goes without telling,' I reply, bitterly.

Then there follows a pause, during which mother sighs heavily once or twice, and I do severe battle with my conscience. At the end of it I cry suddenly—

'Mother, there is one thing for which I *do* blame myself, but at first it did not occur to me that it might be wrong. One day we were talking of photographs, Mr. Carrington and I, and—and two days afterwards I gave him mine. He put it in his locket, and when Dora saw him down by the river it was *it* he was kissing. I never dreamed it *could* be mine until he showed it to me yesterday.'

'I had forgotten to ask you about that. Dora and your father were discussing it just now, and Dora declared she was certain it had happened as you have now stated. Phyllis, if there has not been actual

duplicity in your conduct there has at least been much imprudence.'

'I know that, mother,' I return, disconsolately.

'This will greatly add to your discredit in the affair—you must see that. Really,' says mother, sinking into a chair, and sighing again, 'this engagement, that should cause us all such pride and joy, is only a source of annoyance and pain.'

'Then I won't marry him at all, mother,' I cry, recklessly. 'I don't want to one bit; and probably if I tell him to-morrow I hate and despise him *he* will not want to either. Or shall I write? A letter will go far quicker.'

But mother is aghast at this daring proposal. Because he has disappointed her hopes in one quarter is no reason why she should lose him altogether as a son-in-law.

'No, no,' she says, in a slightly altered tone. 'Let things remain as they now are. It is a good match for you in every sense of the word; and setting him free would give Dora no satisfaction. But I wish it had all come about differently.'

With that she turns from me and goes towards the door. My heart feels breaking.

'Oh, mother, you are not going to leave me like this, are you?' I burst out, miserably. 'When other girls get engaged, people are kind and say nice things to them; but nobody seems to care about *me*, nobody wishes *me* joy. Am I *nothing* to you? Am I to get only hard and cruel words?' Piteous sobs interrupt me. I cover my face with my hands.

Of course in another moment I am folded in mother's arms, and her soft hands press my graceless head down upon the bosom that never yet in all my griefs has failed me. Two of her tears fall upon my cheek.

'My darling child,' she whispers, 'have I been too unkind to you? I did not mean it, Phyllis; but I have been made so miserable by all I have heard.'

‘But you don’t think me deceitful, mother?’

‘No, not now—not at any time, I think; but I was greatly upset by poor Dora’s disappointment. My darling, I hope you will be happy in your choice, and in my heart I believe you will. At all events, he is not blind to the virtues of my dear girl. He loves you very dearly, Phyllis. Are you sure, my dearest, that you love him?’

‘Did *you* love papa very much, darling, when you married him?’

‘Of course, dear,’ with a faint blush.

‘Oh, mother, did you really?’ Then, with a reflective sigh: ‘At that rate I am rather glad I do not love Mr. Carrington.’

‘Phyllis! what are you saying? It is the first duty of every woman to love her husband. You must try to regard Mr. Carrington in that light.’

‘I *like* him, and that is better. *You* were blind to papa’s faults because you loved him; that was a mistake. Now, I shall *not* be blind to Marmaduke’s; and if he does anything very horrid, or develops unpleasant symptoms, I shall be able to give him up before it is too late. If you had been fully alive to papa’s little tempers, mother, I don’t suppose you would *ever* have married him—would you?’

‘Phyllis, I cannot allow you to discuss your father in this manner. It is neither dutiful nor proper; and it vexes me very much.’

‘Then I won’t vex you. But I read in a book the other day, “It is better to respect your husband than to love him.”’

‘One should do both, of course; but, oh, Phyllis! try to *love* him; that is the great softener in the married life. It is so easy to forgive when love urges. You are young, my pet, but you have a tender heart, and so I pray all may be well with you. Yet when I think of your leaving me to face the wide world I feel

lonely. I fancy I could have better spared Dora than my own wild Phyllis.'

She whispers this soothingly into my ear, kisses me as only a mother *can* kiss, and leaves me presently wholly comforted. If mother indeed loves me, the scapegrace, better than her model Dora, I have reason to feel glad and grateful.

Meanwhile the household is divided. 'The boy Billee,' as Roland calls him, has been sent for two hours into solitary confinement, because, on hearing the great news, he exclaimed, 'Didn't I tell you all along how it would be?' in a heartless and triumphant manner—thus adding insult to Dora's injury.

Roly also is on my side, and comes upstairs to tell me so.

'You have twice the spirit, you know,' he says, in a tone meant to compliment. 'Dora is too dead-and-alive—no man born would be tormented with her. I am awfully glad, Phyllis.'

And then he speaks of 'poor Dora,' and a moment later goes into convulsions of laughter over 'poor Dora's discomfiture.'

'She made so sure, don't you know, and that. Had upset and re-arranged Strangemore and Carrington and everything to her own entire satisfaction. Oh! by Jove, it is the best joke I ever heard in my life,' and so on.

When by chance during the evening papa and I meet, though his manner is frozen, he makes no offensive remarks; and, strange as it appears to me, I seem to have gained some dignity in his eyes. So the long hours of that day drag by and night falls at last.

After dinner Dora comes creeping in, her eyelids red and swollen, her dainty cheeks bereft of their usual soft pink. Misery and despair are depicted in every line of her face and figure.

Papa rises ostentatiously and pushes an easy-chair

towards the fire for her (already the touch of winter is upon us). Mamma pours her out a glass of papa's own port. Even Billy proclaims a truce for the time being, and places a footstool beneath my injured sister's feet; while I sit apart and feel myself a murderess.

I begin to vaguely wonder whether, were I in Dora's place, all these delicate attentions would be showered upon me. I also try to decide whether, if I had been slighted by my beloved, I would publish the fact upon the housetops, and come down to the bosom of my family with scarlet eyes and pallid face, and hair effectively loosened; or whether I would hide my sorrow with my life and endure all in heroic silence. I have got as far as the Spartan boy in my meditations, when Roland, bringing his fingers to meet upon the fleshy part of my arm, causes me to spring from my seat and give utterance to an emphatic '*Oh!*' while Cheekie, the fox terrier, who is crouching in her favourite position at my feet, coming in for a full share of my weight, sets up a corresponding howl, and altogether the confusion is complete.

When it has subsided there ensues an awful pause. Then papa speaks.

'It would be waste of time to appeal to your better feeling, Phyllis—you *have none!* But that you are hopelessly wanting in all delicacy of sentiment, you would understand that this is no time to indulge in a vulgar overflow of spirits. Do you not see how your sister is suffering? Your heartlessness is downright *disgusting*. Leave the room.'

I instantly avail myself of the permission to withdraw, only too glad of the excuse, and retire, followed closely by Roland, who I can see is choking with suppressed laughter.

'Yow could you do it?' I ask, reproachfully, as we gain the hall-door. 'They are all angry enough as it is.'

'I could not help it,' returns Roly, still struggling

with his merriment; 'the solemnity of the whole thing was too much for me. I knew I was going to laugh out loud, so pinched you to draw off attention.'

'I think you *might* have chosen Billy.'

'He was too far off—you were the most convenient.'

'And so you sacrificed me to save yourself!' I exclaim, indignantly.

Like all men, Roland is unutterably selfish; unlike all men, he is ever ready to make atonement, once the selfish act is accomplished.

'Even so,' he says now. 'But look here, Phyllis: I'll make it up to you. Here's ten bob.' And he tries to force the money into my unwilling hand.

'No, keep it,' I return, softened by the gift; 'I can do without it, and I am sure you want it yourself.'

'I don't, *really*,' says Roland, looking fair into my eyes. 'I have plenty—for awhile; and you know you said yesterday you had spent your last penny. When you are Mrs. Carrington you can stand to me. Here—no nonsense—if you don't take it this moment I'll chuck it into the pond.'

Thus threatened I take it; and then together we stroll into the kitchen garden, where Roland reduces his laughter-loving mind to order with the aid of the fragrant weed.

## CHAPTER XIII.

OUR engagement having received the openly-expressed though secretly unwilling sanction of my father, Mr. Carrington comes every other day to our house, when he of course meets with overpowering sweetness from everybody—Dora excepted. Not that she shows him any demonstrative dislike. If she happens to be in the room when he arrives she is as civil as the occasion calls for, but at the first opportunity she makes her exit, not to return again during his stay, and if possible avoids

his society altogether. A heavy sense of injury is upon her, impossible to lift.

To me she has said little or nothing on the subject. Once, two days after my engagement was made known, happening to find herself alone with me, she said, curiously—

‘Was it your photograph I saw Mr. Carrington kissing that day?’

And when I answered ‘Yes,’ rather shamefacedly, she turned from me with lowered lids and a curved smile that suggested many thoughts. Like most even-tempered people, Dora, when roused, is singularly obstinate and unforgiving.

At times I am a little unhappy, but very seldom. On such occasions the horrible doubt that I am marrying Marmaduke for his money crushes me. Every now and then I catch myself revelling in the thought of what I shall do for Billy and Roly and all of them when plenty of gold is at my disposal. I try to think how much I like him, how handsome he is, how kind, how good to me, but always at the end of my cogitations I find my thoughts reverting to the grand house in which I am to reign as queen, or to the blue velvet dress I mean to wear, as soon as ever I can afford to buy it.

I now glory in an engagement-ring that sparkles fairly and gives me much pleasure. I have also an enormous locket, on which the letters P.M.V. are marked out by brilliants. This latter contains an exquisitely painted miniature of my betrothed, and is given to me by him in a manner that betokens doubt of its being acceptable.

‘I don’t suppose you will care for the picture part of it,’ he says, with a laugh and a rather heightened colour.

But I *do* care for it, picture and all, and tell him so, to his lasting satisfaction, though it must be confessed I look oftener at the *outside* of that locket than at any other part of it. Thus by degrees I find myself

laden with gifts of all kinds—for the most part costly; and as trinkets are scarce with us and jewels imaginary, it will be understood that each new ornament added to my store raises me higher in the social scale.

So time speeds, and Christmas passes and gentle spring grows apace.

‘Come out,’ says Billy one morning early in April, thrusting a dishevelled head into my room: ‘come out; it is almost warm.’ Whereupon I don my hat and sally forth, my Billy in attendance.

Mechanically we make for the small belt of trees that encircles and bounds our home and is by courtesy ‘our wood.’ It is my favourite retreat—the spot most dear to me at Summerleas. Ah! how sweet is everything to-day, how fragrant! The primrose golden in its mossy bed, supported by its myriad friends; the pretty purple violet—the white one prettier still. I sigh and look about me sadly.

‘This is the very last spring I shall ever spend at home,’ I say at length, being in one of my sentimental and regretful moods.

‘Yes,’ returns Billy, ‘this time next year, I suppose, you will be holding high court at Strangemore. How funny you will look! you are so small! Why, you will be an out-and-out swell then, Phyllis, and can cut the county if you choose. What are you so doleful about? Ain’t you glad?’

‘No, I am not,’ I reply, emphatically; ‘I am sorry—I am *wretched*. Everything will be so new and big and strange, and—you will not be there. Oh, Billy!’ flinging my arms around his neck, ‘I feel *that* worst of all. I am *too* fond of you, and that’s a fact.’

‘Well, and I am awfully fond of you too,’ says Billy, giving me a bearlike hug that horribly disarranges my appearance, but is sweet to me, so much do I adore my ‘boy Billee.’

We seat ourselves on a grassy knoll and give ourselves up to gloomy forebodings.



‘It is a beastly nuisance, your getting married at all,’ says Billy, grumpily. ‘If it had been Dora, now, it would have been a cause for public rejoicing, but you are different. What I am to do without you in this stupid hole is more than I can tell. I shall get papa to send me to a boarding-school when you go. (The Eton plan has not yet been divulged.) Why on earth did you take a fancy to that fellow, Phyllis? Were you not very well as you were?’

‘It was *he* took a fancy to *me*, if you please. I never thought of such a thing. But there is little use discussing that now. Marry him I must before the year is out; and really perhaps, after all, I shall be very happy.’

‘Oh, yes, I daresay, if being happy means settling down and having a lot of squalling brats before you can say Jack Robinson. I know how it will be,’ says Billy, moodily: ‘you will be an old woman before your time.’

‘Indeed I shall not,’ I cry, with much indignation, viewing with discomfort the ruins to which he has reduced my handsome castle. ‘I intend to keep young for *ever* so long. Why, I am only eighteen now, and I shan’t be old until I am *thirty*. And, Billy,’ coaxingly, ‘you shall see what I shall do for *you* when I marry him—I will send you to *Eton*. There!’

‘Why don’t you say you will send me to the moon?’ replies he, with withering contempt.

‘But I will really, Marmaduke *says* I shall; and you are to spend all your holidays at Strangemore; and I will keep a gun for you and a dog; and maybe he will let me give you a *horse*.’

‘Oh, fiddlesticks!’ says the dear boy. ‘Draw a line somewhere. You have said too much; and I’ve outgrown my belief in the Arabian Nights. I will be quite content with the dog and gun.’

‘Well, you shall see. And Roland shall have money *every* now and then to pay his debts; and Dora shall have as many new dresses as she can wear; and for

mamma I will get one of those delightful easy-chairs we saw in the shop-window in Carston—the one that moves up and down, you know—and—— Oh, Billy! I think it is a glorious thing to be rich. If I could only do all I say, I believe I would marry him were he as ugly as sin.'

In the enthusiasm of the moment I spring to my feet, and as I do so become fatally aware that not two yards from me stands Marmaduke, leaning against a tree. There is a curious, not altogether amiable expression upon his face, that assures me he has overheard our conversation. Yet one cannot accuse him of eaves-dropping, as if we had only taken the trouble to raise our heads our eyes must inevitably have met his.

I am palsied with shame and horror, I am stricken dumb; and Billy, looking lazily upwards from where he is stretched full length upon the sward to discover the cause, in his turn becomes aware of the enemy's presence. A moment later he is on his feet and has beaten a masterly retreat, leaving me alone to face the foe.

Mr. Carrington comes slowly forward.

'Yes, I heard every word,' he says, calmly, anger and reproach in his eyes.

I make no reply: I feel myself incapable of speech. Indeed, looking back upon it now, I think silence was the better part, as, under the circumstances, I don't quite see what I could have said.

'So this is the light in which you regard our marriage!' he goes on, bitterly: 'as a means to an end—no more. At the close of six months I find myself as far from having gained a place in your affections as when we first met. I may well despair. Your heart seems full of thought and love for everyone, Phyllis, except for the man you have promised to marry.'

'Then give me up,' I say, defiantly, though my false courage sinks as I remember what a row there will be at home if he takes me at my word.

'No, I will *not* give you up. I will marry you in

spite of your coldness—I am more determined on it now than ever,’ he makes answer, almost fiercely.

I feel uneasy, not to say unhappy. I have heard of men marrying women for spite and revenging themselves upon them afterwards. This recollection is not reassuring. I glance at Marmaduke furtively, and persuade myself he is looking downright vindictive.

‘Yes,’ I murmur, doubtfully, ‘and perhaps, afterwards, when I was your wife, you would be cruel to me, and——’

‘Phyllis,’ he interrupts me, hastily, ‘what are you saying? Who has put such a detestable idea into your head? I unkind to you, or cruel! Child, can you not even *imagine* the depth of the love I bear you?’

I know I am going to cry. Already are my eyes suffusing; my nose develops a tickling sensation. I am indignant with myself at the bare thought, but nevertheless I feel assured if I open my mouth it will be to give utterance to a sob. If I cry before him now he will think——

‘Phyllis, do you really wish to marry me?’ asks Mr. Carrington, suddenly, trying to read my hot and averted face. ‘If you repent your promise say so; it is not yet too late to withdraw. Better bear pain now than lasting misery hereafter. Answer me truly—do you wish to be my wife?’

‘I do,’ I return, earnestly. ‘I shall be happier with you, who are always kind to me, than I am at home. It is only at times I feel regretful. But of course—if you don’t want to marry me——’ I pause, overcome by the ignominy of this thought.

Mr. Carrington takes my hand.

‘I would give half my possessions to gain your love,’ he says, softly; ‘but even as it is no bribe on earth could induce me to relinquish you. Don’t talk about my giving you up. That is out of the question. I could as easily part with my life as with my Phyllis. Perhaps,’ with a rather sad little smile, ‘some time in

the future you may deem me worthy to be placed in a category with Billy and Roland and the rest of them.'

A mournful sound breaks from me. I search my pocket for a handkerchief wherewith to wipe away the solitary tear that meanders down my cheek. Need I say it is not there? Mr. Carrington, guessing my want, produces a very snowy article from somewhere and hands it to me.

'Do you want one?' he asks, tenderly, and presently I am dissolved in tears, my nose buried in my lover's cambric.

'I am sure you must hate me,' I whisper, dismally. 'I make you unhappy almost every time we meet. Mr. Carrington, will you try to forget what I said just now and forgive me?'

'How can I forgive you anything when you call me Mr. Carrington?'

'Marmaduke, then.' He presses me closer to him, and I rub my stained and humid countenance up and down against his coat. I am altogether penitent.

'After all, Marmaduke, maybe I didn't say anything so very dreadful,' I venture, at the end of a slight pause. 'I was only thinking, and deciding on what I would like to give everybody when—when I was your wife. Was that very bad?'

'No, there was nothing to vex me in all that; it only showed me what a loving generous little heart my pet has. But then, Phyllis, why did you give me so plainly to understand you were marrying me only for the sake of my odious money, by saying—what you did in your last speech?'

'What did I say?'

'That for the sake of being rich you would marry me (or anyone else your tone meant), even were I "as ugly as sin."'

'If I said that it was an untruth, because if you were as ugly as Bobby de Vere, for instance, I most certainly would *not* marry you. I detest plain people.'

‘Well, at all events I think you owe me some reparation for the pain you have inflicted.’

‘I do, indeed,’ I admit eagerly. ‘Lay any penance you like upon me, and I will not shrink from it. I will do whatever you ask.’

‘Will you?’ quickly. ‘Then kiss me of your own accord. I don’t believe, up to this, Phyllis, you have ever yet done so of your own sweet will.’

‘I will do it now, then,’ I return, heroically, and straightway, raising myself on tiptoe, without the smallest pretence at prudery, I fling myself into his arms and kiss him with all my heart.

No accomplished coquette seeking after effect could have achieved a more complete success by her arts than I have by this simple act, which is with me an every-day occurrence where the boys are concerned. By it I have obtained a thousand pardons if need be.

He is evidently surprised, and grows a little pale; then smiles, and strains me to him with passionate fervour.

‘My darling—my own! Oh, Phyllis! if I could only make you love me!’ he whispers, longingly.

‘Marmaduke,’ I say presently, in a rather bashful tone, trifling with the lapel of his coat.

‘Well, my pet?’

‘I have something to say to you.’

‘Have you, darling?’

‘I want to tell you that I think I must be growing fond of you.’

‘My angel!’

‘Yes. And do you know why I think so?’

‘No; I cannot imagine how anything so unlikely and desirable should come to pass.’

‘I will tell you. Do you remember how, long ago, when first you kissed me, I disliked it so much that it made me cry?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, now I find I don’t mind it one bit!’

Instead of being struck with the good sense of this discovery, Marmaduke roars with laughter.

‘Oh, you needn’t laugh,’ I say, slightly offended; ‘it is a very good sign. I have read in books how girls shudder and shiver when kissed by a man they don’t like; and as I never shudder or shiver when you kiss me, of course that means that I like you immensely. Don’t you see?’

‘I do,’ says Marmaduke, who is still laughing heartily. ‘And I also see it is an excellent reason why I should instantly kiss you again. Oh, Phyllis! I think if we looked in the family Bible we would discover we had all mistaken your age, and that you are only ten instead of eighteen.’

‘Why?’

‘For many reasons. Come, let us walk on.’

As lunch hour approaches we retrace our steps until we reach the principal avenue. Here Mr. Carrington declines my invitation to enter the house and partake of such light refreshments as may be going, and departs, with a promise to take us for a drive the following day.

Nature tells me the luncheon hour must be past, and, impelled by hunger, I run down the gravel sweep at the top of my speed; but, just as I get to the thick bunch of laurels that conceals the house from view, Billy’s voice, coming from nowhere in particular, stops me. Presently, from between the evergreens, his head emerges.

‘I thought he was with you,’ he says, with an air of intense relief. ‘Well?’

‘Well?’ I reiterate.

‘Why don’t you tell me,’ cries Billy, angrily, ‘instead of standing there with your mouth open? Did he hear what we said?’

‘Yes, every word.’

‘Oh, dear, oh, dear!’ with a dismal groan. ‘And who is to tell them at home, I would like to know?’

‘Tell them what?’

‘Why, about—— Surely you don’t mean to tell me he is going to marry you after all that?’ exclaims Billy, his eyes enlarged to twice their usual size.

‘Yes, of course he is,’ I reply, with much dignity and indignation combined. ‘When a man loves a woman he does not give her up for a trifle.’

“A trifle”! Well, I never!’ murmurs Billy, floored for once in his life.

## CHAPTER XIV.

WE are in the orchard at Summerleas alone, Mr. Carrington and I, with the warm but fitful April sun pouring heavily down upon us. All around is one great pink-and-white sheet of blossom; the very paths beneath our feet seem covered with tinted snow.

It is one of those pet days that, coming too soon, make us discontented to think to-morrow may again be damp and chill; a day that brings with it an early foretaste of what will be, and is still and heavy as in the heart of summer.

‘It will be a good year for fruit,’ I tell my lover, soberly, ‘the trees are showing such a fair promise.’ And my lover laughs and tells me I am a wonderful child; that he has not yet half-dived into the deep stores of private knowledge I possess. He supposes when I come to Strangemore he may dismiss his steward, as probably I will be competent to manage everything there—the master included.

Whereupon I answer saucily I need not go to Strangemore for *that*, as I fancy I have him pretty well under control even as it is. At this he pinches my ear and prophesies the time will yet come when it will be *his* turn to menace *me*.

Our orchard has not been altogether sacrificed to the inner man; here and there one comes upon

straggling slopes of greenest grass and long irregular beds of old-fashioned and time-honoured flowers—such flowers as went to deck Ophelia's grave or grew to grace the bank whereon Titania slept.

High up in the western wall a small green gate gives entrance to another garden—a quaint spot, picturesquely wild, that we children chose to name Queen Elizabeth's Retreat. Long lines of elms grow here, through which some paths are cut—paths innocent of gravel and green as the grass that grows on either side. Here, too, are beds of flowers and rustic benches.

‘Come, show me anything as pretty as this in all Strangemore,’ I say, with triumph, as we seat ourselves on an ancient oaken contrivance that threatens at any moment to bring the unwary to the ground.

‘I wonder if you will ever think anything at Strangemore as worthy of admiration as what you have here?’ says Marmaduke, passing his arm lightly round my waist.

‘Perhaps. But I know every nook and cranny of this old place so well and love it so dearly! I can remember no other home. We came here, you know, when I was very young and Billy only a baby.’

‘But Strangemore will be your home when you come to live with me. You will try to like it for my sake, will you not? It is dearer to me than either of the other places, although they say Luxton is handsomer. Don't you think you will be able to love it, Phyllis?’

‘Yes, but not for a long time. I can like things at once, but it takes me years and years and years to love anything.’

‘Does that speech apply to persons? If so, I have a pleasant prospect before me. You have known me but a few months; will it take you “years and years and years” to love me?’

There is lingering hope in his tone, expectancy in his eyes.



‘You? Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps so,’ I reply, with unpleasant truthfulness.

Marmaduke removes his arm from round me and frowns.

‘You are candour itself,’ he says, with a slight tinge of bitterness. ‘Certainly I can never hereafter accuse you of having concealed the true state of your feelings towards me. Whatever else you may be, you are honest.’

‘I am,’ I return, reluctantly; ‘I wish I were not. I am always saying the wrong thing, and repenting it afterwards. Papa says my candour makes me downright vulgar. Marmaduke, do you think honesty the best policy?’

I glance up at him with questioning eyes from under the flapping hat that has braved so many summers.

‘I do,’ he answers, warmly; ‘I think there is nothing on earth so sweet or so rare as perfect truthfulness. Be open and true and honest, darling, and like yourself as long as you can. Every hour you live will make the *rôle* more difficult.’

‘But why? You are older than I am, Marmaduke: would you tell a lie?’

‘No, not a direct lie, perhaps, but I might pretend to what I did not feel.’

‘Oh, but that is nothing. I would do that myself,’ I exclaim, confidentially. ‘Many and many a time I have pretended not to know where Billy was when I knew papa was going to box his ears. There is no great harm in that. And Billy has done it for me.’

‘You don’t mean to say Mr. Vernon ever boxed your ears?’

I explode at the tragic meaning of his tone.

‘Often,’ I say, merrily, ‘shoals of times; but that is not half so bad as being sent to bed. However’—reassuringly—‘he has not done it now for ever so long—not since I have been engaged to you.’

‘I should hope not indeed,’ hotly. ‘Phyllis, why

won't you marry me at once? Surely you would be happier with me than—than—living as you now do.'

'No, no,' edging away from him, 'I would not. I am not a bit unhappy as I am. You mistake me; and, as I told you before, he never does it now.'

'But it maddens me to think of his ever having done so. And such pretty little ears too, so pink and delicate! Of all the unmanly blackg—— I beg your pardon, Phyllis; of course it is wrong of me to speak so of your father.'

'Oh, don't mind me,' I say, easily. 'Now you are going to be my husband I do not care about telling you there is very little love lost between me and papa.'

'Then why not shorten our engagement? Surely it has now lasted long enough. There is no reason why you should submit to any tyranny when you can escape from it. If you dislike your father's rule, cut it and come to me; you don't dislike *me*.'

'No; but I should dislike being married very much indeed.'

'Why?' impatiently.

'I don't know,' I return, provokingly; 'but I am sure I should. "Better to bear the ills we have," *et cetera*.'

'You are trifling,' says he, angrily. 'Why not say at once you detest the idea of having to spend your life with me? I believe I am simply wasting my time endeavouring to gain an affection that will never be mine.'

'Then don't waste any more of it,' I retort, tapping the ground petulantly with my foot while fixing my gaze with affected unconcern upon a thick white cloud that rests far away in the eternal blue. 'I have no wish to stand in your light. Pray leave me—I shan't mind it in the least—and don't throw away any more of your precious moments.'

'Idle advice. I can't leave you now, and you know it. I must only go on squandering my life, I suppose,

until the end. I do believe the greatest misfortune that ever befell me was my meeting with you.'

'Thank you. You are extremely rude and unkind to me, Marmaduke. If this is your way of making love, I must say I don't like it.'

'I don't suppose you do—or anything else connected with me. Of course it was an unfortunate thing for me, my coming down here and falling idiotically in love with a girl who does not care whether I am dead or alive.'

'That is untrue. I care very much indeed about your being alive.'

'Oh! common humanity would suggest that speech.'

He turns abruptly and walks a few paces away from me. We are both considerably out of temper by this time, and I make a solemn vow to myself not to open my lips again until he offers an apology for what I am pleased to term his odious crossness. Two seconds afterwards I break my vow.

'Why on earth could you not have fallen in love with Dora?' I cry, petulantly, to the back of his head. 'She would do you some credit, and she would love you, too. Everyone would envy you if you married Dora. She never says the wrong thing; and she is elegant and very pretty—is she not?'

'Very pretty,' replies he, drily; 'almost lovely, I think, with her fair hair and beautiful complexion and sweet smile. Yes, Dora is more than pretty.'

'If you admire her so much why don't you marry her?' say I, sharply. Although I am not in love with Marmaduke I strongly object to his expressing unlimited admiration for my sister or any other woman.

'Shall I tell you?' says he, suddenly, coming back to me to take me in his arms and strain me close to him. 'Because in my eyes you are ten times lovelier. Because your hair, though darker, pleases me more. Because your complexion, though browner, is to me more fair. Because your smile, though less uniformly

sweet, is merrier and tenderer and more lovable. There! have I given you enough reasons for the silly preference I feel for a little girl who does not care a straw about me?’

‘Oh, yes, I do; I like you very much,’ I answer, greatly mollified. ‘I do really—better and better every day.’

‘Do you indeed?’ rapturously. ‘My own darling!’

‘Yes,’ I say, in a thoroughly matter-of-fact tone, with a view to bringing him back to earth again without any unnecessary delay. ‘But how can you be so fond of me, Marmaduke, when you say I am so cross? Now, tell me this,’ laying the first finger of my right hand upon his lips, and beating time there with it to each of my words: ‘why did you first take a fancy to me?’

‘Just because you are Phyllis; I have no other reason. If you were anyone else, or changed in any way, I would not care in the least for you.’

‘At that rate we are likely to have a happy time of it,’ I say, sarcastically, ‘considering I am never the same for two weeks running. And papa says everyone’s disposition undergoes a complete alteration every seven years.’

‘I’ll risk that,’ says he, laughing. ‘Seven years are a long way off.’

‘But I shall change in less than seven years,’ I say, persistently. ‘Don’t you see? I have done so twice already, at seven and fourteen, and I shall do so again at twenty-one. Therefore in four years’ time I shall be a different person altogether, and you will cease to care for me.’

‘I shall always adore you, Phyllis,’ declares my lover, earnestly, ‘whether we live together for four or fourteen or one hundred and fourteen years.’

This leaves nothing more to be said, so I am silent for a moment or two, and gaze at him with some degree of pride as he stands beside me, with his blue eyes,

tender and impassioned—as handsome a man as ever made vain love to a graceless maiden.

Still, admirable as he is, I have no desire for him to grow demonstrative so soon again; therefore continue the conversation hastily.

‘Were you never in love before?’ I ask, without motive.

It occurs to me that like a flash a faint change crosses his face.

‘All men have fancies,’ he answers, and something tells me he is evading a strict reply.

‘I don’t mean a fancy; I mean a real attachment. Did you ever ask any woman except me to be your wife?’

‘Why?’ he asks, with an attempt at laughter that ends in dismal failure beneath my remorseless eyes. ‘Will you throw me over if I say “Yes”?’

‘No; of course not. But I think you might have told me before. Here have you been pretending all along you never loved anyone but me, and now I discover accidentally that long before you knew me you had broken your heart over dozens of women.’

‘I had not,’ angrily. ‘Why do you misconstrue my words?’

‘Oh, of course you had.’

‘I really wish, Phyllis, you would not give yourself the habit of contradicting people so rudely. I tell you I had not.’

‘Well, you were madly in love with one, at all events,’ I say, viciously. ‘I could see that by your eyes when I asked you the question.’

‘If a man commits a folly once in his life he is not to be eternally condemned for it, I suppose?’

‘I never said it was a folly to love anyone; I only suggested it was deceitful of you not to have told about it before. I hate secrets of any kind.’ My companion winces visibly. ‘There, don’t be uneasy,’ I say, loftily. ‘I have no desire to pry into any of your affairs.’

We pace up and down in uncomfortable silence.  
At length—

‘I see you are angry, Phyllis,’ he says.

‘Oh, dear, no. Why should such an insignificant thing, that does not affect me in any way, make me angry?’

‘My darling child, I think you are; and, oh, Phyllis! for what? For a hateful passion that is dead and buried this many a year, and bore no faintest resemblance to the deep true affection I feel for you. Am I the worse in your eyes because I once—when I was almost a boy—fancied my heart was lost? Be reasonable, and be kind to me. You have been anything but that all this morning.’

‘Was she dark or fair?’ I ask, in a milder tone, not noticing, however, the hand he holds out to me.

‘Dark—abominably dark.’

‘And tall?’

‘Detestably so.’

‘You need not abuse her now,’ I say, reprovingly.  
‘You loved her once.’

‘I did not,’ cries he, with some excitement. ‘I could never have loved her. It was a mad boyish infatuation. Let us forget her, Phyllis; the subject is hateful to me. Oh, my darling, my pet, no one ever really crept into my heart except you—you small, cold, cruel little child.’

I am softened. I make up my mind I will not be cold during the remainder of our day, so I slip my ungloved hand into his and bring myself close up to his side.

‘I will forgive you this time,’ I whisper; ‘but, Marmaduke, promise me that never in the future will you conceal anything from me.’

‘I promise—I swear,’ says my betrothed, eagerly, and I receive, and graciously return, the kiss of reconciliation he lays upon my lips.

## CHAPTER XV.

WE are unmistakably and most remarkably late, but that is scarcely a matter for wonder, considering the animal we drove and the vehicle in which we journeyed. We have been bumped and jolted and saddened all the way from Summerleas, besides having endured agonies of shame and fear, lest any of the grander folk meeting us upon the road should look down upon us from their aristocratic equipages and scorn our dilapidated condition. By taking an unfrequented route, however, we arrive unseen, and are spared so much humiliation.

When Mr. Carrington asked me a week ago if a garden party at Strangemore would give me any pleasure—so little are we accustomed to gaieties of any kind—my spirits rose to fever height, and I told him without hesitation nothing on earth he could do for me would occasion me greater delight than his ordering and regulating a *fête* in which I might bear a part. Afterwards, when I fully understood the consequences of my rash words, how heartily did I repent them!

First came the battle with papa about the necessary garments to be worn at it—gowns we should have and gowns we had not—and a skirmish naturally followed. Mamma and Dora undertook to face the foe alone in this instance (it being unanimously decided in conclave that my presence on the scene would only hinder any chances of success), and after a severe encounter Dora triumphed—as somehow Dora always does triumph—though I am bound to admit many tears were shed and many reproaches uttered before victory was declared in our favour.

Then came the getting to Strangemore in the disgraceful fossil that clings to us like a nightmare, and won't fall to pieces from decay.

Half an hour before we start papa caracoles away on

his sprightly roan, got up regardless of expense, leaving Brewster to drive us, with Billy seated beside him on the box-seat ; while we three women sit inside and try to think our dresses are not crushed, while undergoing the hour and a half of anguish before described on our way.

As we are all fully alive to the fact that to face the hall-door at Strangemore and the assembled county in our shandrydan is more than we can endure, we enter the grounds by a back way ; and having given Brewster strict orders to reach the yard without being seen, and if seen to answer no inconvenient questions, we alight, and, shaking out our trains, proceed towards the gardens.

My dress is composed of simple batiste, but is a wonderful mingling of palest pink and blue, impossible to describe ; my hat is also pink and blue, my gloves delicately tinted. Marmaduke's earrings, and locket, and bracelets, and rings, are scattered all over my person ; and altogether I flatter myself I am looking as well as it is possible for Phyllis Vernon to look.

Dora is in a ravishing costume, of which blue silk forms the principal part, and has put on a half-pouting, just-awakened expression, that makes her appear a lovely grown-up baby.

Mamma is looking, as she always looks in my eyes, perfectly beautiful.

She and Dora march on in front, while Billy and I bring up the rear. To my excited imagination it seems as if all the world were met together on the croquet-lawn. I say, 'Oh, Billy!' in an exhilarated tone, and give his arm a squeeze ; but as the dear fellow thinks it necessary to be morose on the occasion he takes it badly, and tells me, angrily, to moderate my transports, or people will say I have never been at any entertainment before—which if people did say it would be unusually near the truth.

Presently Marmaduke, seeing us, comes quickly up,



and having welcomed mother and Dora, offers me his arm with the air of a proprietor, and carries me away from my family.

I feel as though treading on air, and am deliciously far from shyness of any description. Before we have gone very far my conversational powers assert themselves.

‘Marmaduke, don’t you think I am looking very nice?’ I say, naïvely.

‘Very, darling. You always look that.’

This general praise disappoints me. Whatever an infatuated person may have chosen to consider me in the time past, I am satisfied that at the present moment I really am worthy of admiration.

‘But you cannot have seen my dress,’ I persist; ‘it came all the way from London; and *we* all think it so pretty. Look at it, Marmaduke.’

He turns his head willingly in my direction, but his gaze gets little further than my face.

‘It is charming,’ he says, with enthusiasm. ‘That pale green suits you tremendously.’

‘Pale green!’ and I am all faintest azure. I break into a merry laugh and give him an imperceptible shake.

‘Green, you ridiculous boy! Why, there is not a particle of green about me. I am nothing but pink and blue. Do look at me again, Marmaduke, or I shall die of chagrin.’

‘Well, it was the blue I meant,’ declares my lover, composedly. Then: ‘Come with me to the other side, Phyllis; I want to introduce you to Lady Alicia Slate-Gore.’

‘Lady Alicia!’ I gasp, awestruck. ‘Is—is the Duke here?’

‘No; he is in Scotland. Lady Alicia came by herself. She is an old friend of mine, darling, and I am very fond of her. I want you, therefore, to be particularly charming to her.’

‘How can you expect me to be that—under the circumstances?’ I ask, lightly, glancing up at him from under my lashes with a sudden and altogether new touch of coquetry born of the hour and my gay attire. ‘How can I be amiable, when you tell me in that bare-faced fashion of your adoration for her? Of course I shall be desperately jealous and desperately disagreeable during the entire interview.’

Marmaduke’s face betrays the intense delight all men feel when receiving flattery from the beloved one. Perhaps, indeed, he appears a trifle sillier than the generality of them, incense coming from me being so totally unexpected. I know by his eyes he would give anything to kiss me, were it not for shame’s sake and the gaping crowd.

‘Is your Lady Alicia very terrific?’ I ask, fearfully; and then almost before he has time to answer my question we are standing before a tall, benevolent-looking woman of forty-five, with a hooked nose, and a scarlet feather in her bonnet, and I am bowing and smirking at Lady Alicia Slate-Gore.

She is more than civil—she is radiant. She taps me on the cheek with her fan and calls me ‘my dear,’ and asks me a hundred questions in a breath. She taps Marmaduke on the arm and asks him what he means by making love to a child who ought to be in her nursery dreaming fairy tales.

At this Marmaduke laughs and says I am older than I look, for which I am grateful to him.

‘Old!’ says my lady, with a rapid bird-like glance at me. ‘The world will soon be upside down. Am I to consider fourteen old?’

‘Phyllis will soon be nineteen,’ says Marmaduke; for which I feel still more grateful, as it was only two months ago I attained my eighteenth year.

‘Indeed—indeed! You should give your friends your receipt, child. You have stolen a good five years from Father Time, and just when you least want it.

Now, if you could only give us old people a written prescription,' &c., &c.

Marmaduke leaves us to go and receive some other guests, and her ladyship still chatters on to me; while I, catching the infection of her spirits, chatter back again to her, until she declares me vastly amusing, and is persuaded Marmaduke has gained a prize in the life-lottery.

Then Bobby de Vere comes up, a little later, and addresses me in his usual florid style; so does fat Mr. Hastings; and presently Lady Alicia appears again, bringing with her a tall gaunt man with a prickly beard, who, she says, is desirous of being introduced.

He is probably a well-intentioned person, but he is very deaf, and has evidently mistaken the whole affair. For example, after a moment or two he electrifies me by saying, 'You are fortunate, Mrs. Carrington, in having so magnificent a day for your *fête*.'

I colour painfully, stammer a good deal, and finally explain, rather lamely, I am not yet Mrs. Carrington, and that my proper name is Vernon. Upon which he too is covered with confusion and makes a hurried and very unintelligible apology.

'Beg pardon 'm, sure. Quite understood from Lady Alicia—most awkward—inexcusably so. Only arrived at the Castle late last night, and am a stranger to everyone here. Pray pardon me.'

I put an end to his misery by smiling and asking him if he would like to walk about a little—an invitation he accepts with effusion.

There are dear little coloured tents scattered all over the place. Bands are playing—so are fountains, and flowers are everywhere. I drink iced Moselle and eat strawberries, and am supremely happy.

My emaciated cavalier escorts me hither and thither, and does all he knows to entertain me. After an hour or so he leaves me, only shortly to return again, and it becomes evident he is bent on studying human nature

in a new form, as he listens with every appearance of the gravest interest to the ceaseless babble that flows from my lips.

The day wears on, and I see hardly anything of Marmaduke; it is already half-past five, and in another hour my joy must end. I stand at the door of a tent, framed in by blue and white canvas, with a crimson strawberry on its way to my lips, and am vaguely wondering at my lover's absence, when I see him coming towards me, by degrees, and with that guilty air that distinguishes most men when endeavouring secretly to achieve some cherished design. He looks slightly bored, but brightens as his eyes meet mine and hurries his footsteps.

As he draws nearer I address to him some commonplace remark, upon which the two or three men who have been amusing me—my gaunt companion included—sheer off from me as though I had the plague; it being thoroughly understood on all sides that in me they behold the 'coming Queen' of Strangemore.

Their defection, however, disconcerts me not at all. I am too glad, too utterly gay on this glorious afternoon to let any trifles annoy me.

'Did you miss me?' asks Marmaduke, tenderly.

'Hardly. You see I have had scarcely time—I have been enjoying myself so much. It has been a delicious day altogether. Have you enjoyed it, Marmaduke?'

'No. I was away from you.' There is a world of reproach in his tone.

'True; I had forgotten that,' I say, wickedly. Then: 'To tell the truth, 'Duke, I was just beginning to wonder had you forgotten my existence. How did you manage to keep away from me for so long?'

'What unbearable conceit! I could not come to you a moment sooner. If I had to get through so much hard work every day as was put upon me this afternoon

I believe I should die of a decline. Don't you feel as if you hated all these people, Phyllis? I do.'

'No, indeed; I bear them nothing but good will. They have all helped by their presence to make up the sum of my enjoyment.'

'I am so glad the day has been a success—to you at least. Are you looking at that old turret, darling? There is such a beautiful view of the gardens from one of those windows!' This last suggestively.

'Is there?' I answer, with careless indifference. Then, good-naturedly: 'I think I would like to see it.'

'Would you?' much gratified. 'Then come with me.'

In his heart I know he is rejoiced at the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* alone with me—rejoiced, too, at the chance of getting rid for awhile of all the turmoil and elegant bustle of the crowd.

I go with him, down the garden path, through the shrubberies, up the stone steps, and into the large hall; past immodest statues and up interminable stairs, until we reach the small round chamber of which he speaks.

I run to the window and look down eagerly upon the brilliant scene below; and certainly what meets my eyes rewards me for the treadmill work I have undergone for the purpose.

Beneath me lie the gardens, a mass of glowing colour, while far beyond them as the eye can reach stretches the wood in all its green and bronze and brown-tinged glory. Upon the right spreads the park, soft and verdant. Below me the gaily-robed guests pass ceaselessly to and fro, and the sound of their rippling laughter climbs up the old ivy-covered walls and enters the window where I stand.

'Oh, how lovely it is!' I cry, delightedly. 'Oh, I am so glad I came! How far away they all appear, and how small!'

Marmaduke is watching me with open content; he never seems to tire of my many raptures.

Suddenly I lean forward, and, with flushed cheeks, follow the movements of one of the guests, who hitherto has been unnoticed by me.

‘Surely—surely,’ I cry, with considerable excitement, ‘that is Sir Mark Gore.’

Marmaduke stares. ‘Sir Mark is here,’ he says. ‘Do you know him?’

‘Of course I do,’ I answer, gaily, craning my neck further out of the window, the better to watch my new-old acquaintance; ‘that is, a little. What a handsome man he is! How odd he should be here to-day!’

‘I don’t see the oddness of it,’ rather coldly. ‘I have known him intimately for many years. How did you become acquainted with him, Phyllis?’

‘Oh,’ I say, laughing, ‘our first meeting was a very romantic affair—almost as romantic as my second interview with you.’ I say this with a glance half-shy, half-merry; but Mr. Carrington does not seem as much alive to my drollery as usual. ‘Billy and I had ridden into Carston—I on the old white pony, you know—and, just as we came to the middle of the High Street, Madge shied at a dead sheep, my saddle turned, and but for Sir Mark Gore, who happened to be passing at the moment, I would certainly have fallen off. He rushed to the rescue, caught me in his arms, and deposited me safely on the ground. Was it not near being a tragedy? Afterwards he was even condescending enough to tighten the girths himself, though Billy was well able, and to speed us on our homeward journey. Was it not well he was there?’

‘Very well indeed. And was that all you saw of him?’

‘Oh, dear, no; we became great friends after that. I found him wonderfully good-natured and kind.’

As I speak I am ignorant of the fact that Sir Mark has the reputation of being the fastest man about town.

‘I have no doubt you did,’ says my betrothed, sarcastically; ‘and where did you meet him again?’

‘At a bazaar, a week later. He got Mrs. Leslie, with whom he was staying, to introduce him to me. And then he called with the Leslies, and I think took a fancy to Dora, as he was continually coming to Summerleas after that. Not that he ever came to the point, you know; he did not propose to her or that; which disappointed us all very much, as Mrs. Leslie told mamma he was enormously rich and a good match.

‘You seem to think a great deal of a good match,’ says Marmaduke, very bitterly. ‘Are you so extremely fond of money?’

‘Awfully,’ I say, with charming candour. ‘What can there be better than a lot of it? I shall have plenty when I marry you, Marmaduke, shall I not?’

‘As much as ever you want,’ replies he; but there is no warmth in his tone.

‘Don’t make rash promises. Perhaps I shall want ever so much. Do you know I never had more than two pounds all together at a time in my life, and that only once? My godfather gave it to me the year before last, and it took Billy and me a whole week to decide how we should spend it.’

‘Well?’ absently.

‘Well’—utterly unabashed—‘finally we divided it into four half-sovereigns. With one we bought a present for mother, and were going to do the same for Dora, only she said she would rather have the money itself than anything we would select. Then Billy bought a puppy he had been longing for for a month with the third, besides a lot of white rats—odious little things with no hair on their tails—and a squirrel; and—and that’s all,’ I wind up abruptly.

‘What did you do with the other half-sovereign?’ asks ‘Duke, more from want of something to say than any overpowering curiosity.

‘Oh, nothing—nothing,’ I answer, feeling slightly confused—I don’t know why. ‘I cannot remember, it is so long ago.’

‘Only the year before last, by your own account, and I know your memory to be excellent. Come, tell me what you did with it.’

As he grows obstinate so do I, and therefore answer, with gay evasion—

‘What should I do with it but one thing? Of course I bought a present for my sweetheart.’

Surely some capricious spirit inhabits this room. For the second time since we entered it Marmaduke’s countenance lowers.

‘Why, what is the matter now?’ I ask, impatiently. ‘What are you looking so cross about?’

‘I am not cross,’ indignantly. ‘What is there to make me so? There is no reason why you should not have innumerable sweethearts, as well as every other woman.’

‘Oh!’ I say; and his last speech having made me aware that the word ‘sweetheart’ has been the cause of all the ill-temper, I go on wickedly: ‘Why, none indeed; and this particular one of whom I speak was such a darling! So good to me, too, as he was—I never received an unkind word or a cross look from him. Ah! I shall never forget him.’

‘You are right there. No virtue is as admirable as sincerity. I wonder how you could bring yourself to resign so desirable a lover.’

‘I didn’t resign him. Circumstances over which we had no control arose and separated his lot from mine.’ Here I sigh heavily, and cast my eyes upon the ground with such despairing languor as would have done credit to an Amanda—or a Dora.

‘If I am to be considered one of the “circumstances” in this matter,’ says my lover, hotly, ‘I may tell you at once I do not at all envy the position. I have no desire to come between you and your affections.’

‘You do not,’ I returned, mildly; and, but that when a man is jealous he loses all reasoning and perceptive faculties, he might see I am crimson with



suppressed laughter. 'Had you never appeared on the scene, still a marriage between us would have been impossible.'

'What is his name?' asks 'Duke, abruptly.

'I would rather not tell you.'

'I insist upon knowing. I think I have every right to ask.'

'Oh, why? If I promised him to keep the matter secret, surely you would not ask me to break my faith?'

'Once engaged to me, I object to your keeping faith with any other man.'

'Well, it is all past and gone now,' I murmur, sadly. 'Why rake up the old ashes? Let us forget it.'

'Forget it!' cries Marmaduke, savagely. 'How easy you find it to forget! And you, whom I thought so innocent a child—you, who told me you had never had a lover until I came to Strangemore! I cannot so readily forget what you have now told me. It maddens me to think another man has been making love to you, has held your hands, has looked into your eyes, has—has—— Phyllis'—almost fiercely—'tell me the truth: did he ever kiss you?'

My back is turned to him, but I am visibly shaking. I wonder exceedingly why he does not notice it; but perhaps he does, and puts it down to deep emotion.

'No,' I say, in a smothered tone, 'it never went so far as that.'

'Then why not tell me his name?'

'Because—I—cannot.'

'Will not, you mean. Very good; I will not ask you again. I think we had better return to the grounds.'

He moves a step or two away in the direction of the door. Turning, I burst into a perfect peal of laughter and laugh until the old room echoes again.

'Oh, Marmaduke,' I cry, holding out to him my hands, 'come back to me, and I will tell you all. It was old Tanner, your head gardener, I meant the entire

time. He used to give me all your fruit and flowers before he went to America ; and I bought him an ear-trumpet with my ten shillings, and—oh ! oh ! oh !’

‘Phyllis, Phyllis !’ cries my lover, with reproachful tenderness, and, catching me in his arms, presses upon my lips kisses many and passionate, as punishment for my wrong-doing.

‘How could you do it, darling ? How could you make me so miserable for even a few minutes ?’

‘I could not help it. You looked so angry, and the idea came into my head. And all about old Tanner ! Oh ! There—there, please don’t make me laugh again.’

Friendly intercourse being thus once more restored, and it being necessary we should now return to the guests, I make a bet with him, in which a dozen pairs of gloves count as high as three kisses, and race him down all the stairs, through landings and rooms and corridors, until I arrive breathless but triumphant at the hall-door. Here we pause, flushed and panting, to recover our equanimity, before marching out together calm and decorous to mingle again amongst our friends.

Most of them are standing, draped and shawled, only waiting to bid farewell to their host. Almost on the steps we come in contact with Sir Mark Gore.

‘Miss Vernon,’ he exclaims, with a start of surprise, ‘you here ! How have I missed seeing you all day ? Carrington, when you bring so many people together you should at least give them printed programmes with all their names inscribed, to let them know whom to seek and whom to avoid. Miss Phyllis, how can I tell you how glad I am to see you again ?’

‘Don’t be too glad,’ says ‘Duke, directing a tender smile at me as I stand beaming pinkly upon Sir Mark, ‘or I shall be jealous.’

‘How ! is it indeed so ?’ Sir Mark asks, addressing me. He too has only reached the neighbourhood within the last few hours, and knows nothing of what has been going on of late in our quiet village.

‘Yes, it is indeed so,’ I return, with an assumption of sauciness, though my cheeks are flaming. Then, half-shyly : ‘Will you not congratulate me?’

‘No, I shall congratulate Carrington,’ replies he, shortly, and after a few more words of the most commonplace description leaves us.

Mother is on her feet, and has assumed an important expression. She has sent Billy in quest of Dora. Marmaduke crosses over to her, whispers, and expostulates for a moment or two, until at length mother sinks back again upon her seat with a resigned smile, and sends Billy off a second time with a message to Brewster to betake himself and the fossil back to Summerleas with all possible speed. And so it comes to pass that when the lawns are again empty Mr. Carrington drives us all, through the still and dewy evening, to our home, where he remains to dine and spend the rest of this eventful day.

## CHAPTER XVI.

It is a fortnight later, when the post coming in one morning brings to Dora an invitation from our aunts, the Miss Vernons, to go and stay with them for an indefinite period.

These two old ladies—named respectively Aunt Martha and Aunt Priscilla—are maiden sisters of my father’s, and are, if possible, more disagreeable than he; so that there is hardly anything—short of committing suicide—we would not do to avoid paying them a visit of any lengthened duration.

Being rich, however, they are powerful, and we have been brought up to understand how inadvisable it would be to offend or annoy them in any way.

Dora receives and reads her letter with an unmoved countenance, saying nothing either for or against the proposition it contains, so that breakfast goes on

smoothly. So does luncheon ; but an hour afterwards, as I happen to be passing through the hall, I hear high words issuing from the library, with now and then between them a disjointed sob, that I know proceeds from Dora.

An altercation is at all times unpleasant ; but in our household it is doubly so, as it has the effect of making the master of it unbearably morose for the remainder of the day or night on which it occurs.

Knowing this, and feeling the roof that covers papa to be, in his present state, unsafe, I steal noiselessly to the hall door, and opening it find refuge in the outer air.

As evening falls, however, I am warned of the approach of dinner-hour, and, returning to the house, am safely up the stairs, when Billy comes to meet me, his face full of indignant information.

‘It is a beastly shame,’ he says, in a subdued whisper, ‘and I would not submit to it if I were you. When luncheon was over, Dora went to papa and told him she would not go to Aunt Martha ; and when papa raged and insisted she began to blubber as usual, and said if you were to take her place it would do just as well ; and of course papa jumped at the idea, knowing it would be disagreeable, and says you *shall* go.’

‘What !’ cry I, furious at this new piece of injustice. ‘I shall, shall I ? He’ll see !’

I turn from my brother with an ominous compression of my lips and move towards my bedroom door. The action means ‘Not words, but deeds.’

‘That’s right,’ says Billy, following close in the character of a backer-up, and openly delighted at the prospect of a scrimmage. ‘Fight it out. I would give the governor plenty of cheek if I were you ; he wants it badly. It’s a shame, that’s what it is ; and you engaged and all ! And what will Carrington say ? Do you know’—mysteriously—‘it is my opinion Miss Dora thinks she could get inside you, if you were once

out of the way. She was always a sneak; so I would not give in on any account. But'—despondently—'you will never have the pluck to go through with it when it comes to the point. I know you won't.'

'I will,' I return, gazing back at him with stern determination in my eyes, and then I go into my room to prepare for dinner, leaving him both astonished and pleased at my new-found courage.

In this defiant mood I dress and go downstairs. All through dinner Dora is more than usually agreeable. She smiles continually, and converses gaily in her pretty low-toned elegant way. To me she is particularly attentive, and is apparently deaf to the silence with which I receive her remarks.

Nothing is said on the expected subject of Aunt Martha until it is nearly time for us to retire to the drawing-room, and I am almost beginning to fear the battle will be postponed, when papa, turning to me, says, carelessly, and as though it were a matter of no importance—

'As Dora dislikes the idea of going to your aunts, Phyllis, at this time of year, we have decided on sending you for a month in her place.'

'But I dislike the idea too,' I reply, as calmly as rage will let me.

'That is to be regretted, as I will not have your aunts offended. You are the youngest, and must give way.'

'But the invitation was not sent to me.'

'That will make little difference, and a sufficient excuse can be offered for Dora. As your marriage does not come off until late in the autumn there is no reason why you should remain at home all the summer.'

'This is some of your underhand work,' I say, with repressed anger, addressing Dora.

'I would not speak of "underhand work," if I were *you*,' returns she, smoothly, with an almost invisible flash from her innocent blue eyes.

‘Do not let us discuss the subject further,’ says papa, in a loud tone. ‘There is nothing so disagreeable as public recrimination. Understand once for all, Phyllis, the matter is arranged, and you will be ready to go next week.’

‘I will not,’ I cry, passionately, rising and flinging my napkin upon the ground. ‘I have made up my mind, and I will not go to Qualmsley. Not all the fathers in Christendom shall make me.’

‘Phyllis!’ roars papa, making a wild grab at me as I sweep past his chair; but I avoid him defiantly, and, going out, slam the door with much intentional violence behind me.

I fly through the hall and into the open air. I feel suffocated, half-choked by my angry emotion; but the sweet evening breeze revives me. It is eight o’clock, and a delicious twilight pervades the land.

I run swiftly, an irrepressible sob in my throat, down the lawn, past the paddock, and along the banks of the little stream, until, as I come to what we call the ‘short cut’ to Briersley, I run myself into Mr. Carrington’s arms, who is probably on his way to Summerleas.

Usually my greeting to him is a hand outstretched from my body to the length of my arm. Now I cast myself generously into his embrace. I cling to him with almost affectionate fervour. He is very nearly dear to me at this moment, coming to me as a sure and certain friend.

‘My darling—my life!’ he exclaims, ‘what is it? You are unhappy—your eyes are full of trouble.’

His arms are round me; he presses his lips gently to my forehead. It is a rare thing this kiss, as it is but seldom he caresses me, knowing my antipathy to any demonstrative attentions; but now my evident affliction removes a barrier.

‘I want you to marry me—at once.’ I breathe rather than speak, my hasty running and my excite-

ment having well-nigh stifled me. 'You will, will you not? You must. I will not stay here a moment longer than I can help. You said once you wished to marry me in June—you must wish it still.'

'I do,' he answers, calmly, but his arms tighten round me, and his face flushes. 'I will marry you when and where you please. Do you mean to-morrow?—next week—when?'

'Next month—early next month. I will be ready then. You must tell papa so this evening, and take me away soon. I will show them I will not stay here to be tyrannised over and tormented.'

I burst into tears, and bury my face in his coat.

'You shall not stay an hour longer, if you don't wish it,' returns my lover, rather unsteadily. 'Come with me now, and I will take you to my sister's, and marry you to-morrow.'

'Oh, no, no,' I say, recoiling from him; 'not that—I did not mean that. I did not want to run away with you. Next month will be soon enough. It was only they insisted on my going to Qualmsley, and I was determined I would not.'

'It is disgraceful your being made wretched in this way,' exclaims Marmaduke, wrathfully. 'Tell me what has vexed you.' He is not aware of the Miss Vernons' existence. 'Where is Qualmsley?'

'It is a horrible place, in Yorkshire, where nobody lives except my aunts. They want me to go to stay there next week for a month. The hateful old things wrote inviting Dora, and when she refused to go papa insisted on victimising me in her place. If you only knew Aunt Martha and Aunt Priscilla you would understand my abhorrence—my detestation of them. They are papa's sisters—the very image of him—and tread and trample on one at every turn. I would rather die than go to them. I would far rather marry you.'

I hardly guess the significance of my last words

until I see my lover whiten and wince in the twilight.

‘Of course I don’t mean that,’ I say, confusedly. ‘I only——’

But, as I don’t at all feel sure what it is I do mean, I break down here ignominiously and relapse into awkward silence.

‘Of course not,’ he answers. ‘I quite understand.’ But his voice has lost all its enthusiasm, and somehow his words drag. ‘Had you not better come back to the house, Phyllis? You will catch cold without your hat and in that light dress.’

I am clothed in white muslin, a little open at the throat, and with my arms half-bare. A piece of blue ribbon defines my waist, a bow of the same hue is in my hair; the locket that contains his face is round my neck; a great crimson rose lies upon my bosom.

‘I am not cold,’ I answer; ‘and I am afraid to face papa.’

We are separated now, and I stand alone gazing down into the rippling stream that runs noisily at my feet. Already two or three bright stars are twinkling overhead and shine up at me, reflected from below. Mr. Carrington lets the distance widen between us while regarding me—I feel rather than see—with moody discontented eyes.

‘Phyllis,’ he says presently, in a low tone, ‘it seems to me a horrible thing that the idea of your marriage should be so distasteful to you——’

‘No, no—not distasteful,’ I interrupt, with much deprecation.

‘Don’t say “no” if you mean “yes.” Put my feelings out of the question, and tell me honestly if you are unhappy about it.’

‘I am not. It does not make me more unhappy to marry you than to marry anyone else.’

‘What an answer!’ exclaims Marmaduke, with a groan. ‘Is that all the consolation you can offer me?’



‘That is all. Have not I told you all this long ago?’ I cry, angrily, goaded by the reflection that each word I speak only makes matters harder. ‘Why do you bring the subject up again? Must you too be unkind to me? You cannot have believed me madly in love with you, as I have told you to the contrary ages ago.’

‘So you did. In my folly I hoped time would change you. What a contemptible lover I must be, having failed in eight long months to gain even the affection of a child! Will you never care for me, Phyllis?’

‘I do care for you,’ I return, doggedly, forcing myself to face him. ‘After mamma and Billy and Roland, I care for you more than anyone else. I like you twenty thousand times better than papa or Dora. I cannot say more.’

I tap my foot impatiently upon the ground; my fingers seize and take to pieces wantonly the unoffending rose. As I pull its crimson leaves asunder I drop them in the brook and watch them float away under the moon’s pale rays. I would that my cruel words could so depart.

I feel angry, disconsolate, with the knowledge that through my own act I am cruelly wounding the man who, I must confess it, is my truest friend. I half-think of apologising, of saying something gentle, yet withal truthful, that shall take away the sting I have planted. A few words rise to my lips. I raise my head to give them utterance.

Suddenly his arms are round me—he is kissing me with a passion that is full of sadness. There is so much tenderness mingled with the despair in his face that I too am saddened into silence. Repentant, I slip a hand round his neck and give him back one kiss out of the many.

‘Don’t be sorry,’ I whisper; ‘something tells me I shall yet love you with all my heart. Until then bear

with me. Or, if you think it a risk, Marmaduke, and would rather put an end to it all now, do so, and I will not be angry with you.'

'More probably you would be thankful to me,' he answers, bitterly.

'I would not. I would far rather trust myself to you than stay at home after what has passed.' My voice is trembling, my lips quiver faintly. 'But if one of us must be unhappy let it be me. I release you. I would not——'

'Don't be foolish, child,' he makes answer, roughly. 'I could not release you, even if I would. You are part of my life, and the best part. No; let us keep to our bargain now, whatever comes of it.'

His eyes are fixed on mine; gradually a softer light creeps into his face. Putting up his hand, he smooths back the loose hair from my forehead and kisses me gravely on my lips.

'You are my own little girl,' he says, 'my most precious possession; I will not have you inconsiderately used. Come, I will speak to your father.'

So hand in hand we return to the dragon's den, where, Mr. Carrington having faced the dragon and successfully bullied him, peace is restored, and it is finally arranged that in three weeks we are to be married.

And in three weeks we *are* married. In three short weeks I glide into a new life, in which Phyllis Carrington holds absolute sway, leaving the Phyllis Vernon of the old days—the 'general receiver' of the blame of the family—to be buried out of sight for ever.

First of all mother takes me up to London, and puts me into the hands of a celebrated *modiste*; a woman of great reputation, with piercing eyes, who scowls at me, prods, taps, and measures me, until I lose sight of my own identity and begin to look upon myself as so many inches and fingers and yards embodied. At

length, this terrible person expressing herself satisfied with the examination, we return home again, whither we are shortly followed by many wicker-framed oil-skin-covered trunks, in which lie the results of all the measuring.

Everything is so fresh, so gay, so dainty that I, who have been kept on such low diet with regard to clothing, am enraptured, and as I dress myself in each new gown and survey myself in mother's long glass, sustain a sensation of pleasurable admiration that must be conceit in an 'ugly duckling.'

As Madame charmingly and rather shoppily expresses it, my wedding dress is a 'marvel of elegance and grace'—and lace, she might have added, as Brussels is everywhere. Indeed, as I see it and think of the bill that must follow, the old deadly fear of a row creeps over me, chilling my joy, until I happily and selfishly remember that when it does fall due I shall be far from Summer-leas and papa's wrath, when I become once more enthusiastic in my praise. I even insist on exhibiting myself in it to Marmaduke three nights before my wedding, though all in the house tell me it is unlucky so to do; and Mrs. Tully, the cook, with her eyes full of brandy-and-water, implores me not to be headstrong.

Presents come in from all sides, Bobby de Vere's and Mr. Hastings' being conspicuous more from size than taste. Papa so far overcomes his animosity as to present me with an astonishing travelling-desk, the intricacies of which it takes me months to master, even with the help of Marmaduke. Roland, coming from Ireland for the ceremony, brings with him from the Emerald Isle a necklet too handsome for his purse; while Billy, with tears of love in his dark eyes, puts into my arms a snow-white rabbit that for six long months has been the joy of his heart.

Dora, who at first declared her determination of leaving home during the festivities, on second thoughts changes her mind, having discovered that by absenting

herself the loss of a new dress is all she will gain ; she even consents frostily to be chief bridesmaid. The two Hastings girls, with Bobby de Vere's sister and two of Marmaduke's cousins, also assist ; and Sir Mark Gore is chief mourner.

As the eventful day breaks I wake, and rising, get through the principal part of my dressing without aid, a proceeding that much disappoints mother, who at this last hour of my childhood feels as though I were once more her baby, and would have liked, with lingering touches, to dress me bit by bit.

At eight o'clock Martha knocks at my bedroom door and hands in to us a sealed packet with 'Marmaduke's love' written on the outside, and opening it we disclose to view the Carrington diamonds, reset, remodelled, and magnificent in their brilliancy. This is a happy thought on his part, and raises our spirits for twenty minutes at least ; though after this some chance word makes our eyes grow moist again, and we weep systematically all through the morning—during the dressing, and generally up to the very last moment—so that when at length I make my appearance in church and walk up the aisle on papa's arm I am so white and altogether dejected that I may be considered ghastly.

Marmaduke is also extremely pale, but perfectly calm and self-possessed, and has even a smile upon his lips. As he sees me he comes quickly forward, and, taking me from papa, leads me himself to the altar—a proceeding that causes much excitement amongst the lower members of the congregation, who, in loud whispers, approve his evident fondness for me.

So the holy words are read, and the little mystical golden fetter encircles my finger. I write myself Phyllis Marian Vernon for the last time ; and Sir Mark Gore coming up to me in the vestry-room, slips a beautiful bracelet on my arm and whispers, smiling—

'I hope you will accept all good wishes with this—  
*Mrs. Carrington !*'

I start and blush faintly as the new title strikes upon my ears, and almost forget to thank him in wondering at its strangeness. Then Marmaduke kisses me gravely, and, giving me his arm, leads me back to the carriage, and it is all over!

Am I indeed no longer a child? Is my wish accomplished, and am I at last 'grown up'? How short a time ago I stood in my bridal robes in mother's room, still Phyllis Vernon—still a girl—and now—— Why, it was only a few minutes ago——

'Oh, Marmaduke, am I *really* married?' I say, gazing at him with half-frightened eyes; and he says—

'Yes, I think so,' with an amused smile, and puts his arm round me and kisses me very gently. 'And now we are going to be happy ever after,' he says, laughing a little.

All through breakfast I am in a haze—a dream. I cut what they put upon my plate, but I cannot eat. I listen to Marmaduke's few words as he makes the customary speech, and think of him as though it were yesterday, and not to-day. I cannot realise that my engagement is over, that what we have been preparing for these nine months past is at last a finished fact.

I listen to Sir Mark's clever airy little oration that makes everybody laugh, especially Miss De Vere, and wonder to myself that I too can laugh.

Billy—who has managed to get close up to me—keeps on helping me indefatigably to champagne, under the mistaken impression he is doing me a last service. I catch mamma's sad eyes fixed upon me from the opposite side, and then I know I am going to cry again, and rising from the table get away in safety to my own room, whither I am followed by her, and we say our few final, farewell words in private.

Three hours later I have embraced mother for the last time, and am speeding away from home and friends and childhood to I know not what.

## CHAPTER XVII.

WE have been married nearly three months, and are going on very comfortably. As yet no cross or angry words have arisen between us ; all is smooth as unruffled waters. Though Marmaduke is, if anything, fonder of me than at first, he is perhaps a shade less slavishly attentive. For example, he can now enjoy his 'Times' at breakfast, and read it straight through without raising his eyes between every paragraph, to make sure I am still behind the teapot and have not vanished into thin air ; or to ask me tenderly if I would wish to do this or care to go there.

He has also learned—which is more satisfactory still—that it is possible to know enjoyment even when I am out of sight.

Two months of delicious thoughtless idleness we spend in Spain and Switzerland, and then—we pine for home. This latter secretly, and with a sworn determination that each will be the last to confess it.

One calm glorious evening, however, after dinner, as I stand at the window of our hotel, gazing over the Lake of Geneva, something within me compels the following speech :—

'How beautiful Strangemore must be looking now !'

I feel slightly doubtful of the wisdom of my words when they are uttered, and would have recalled them ; but the encouraging amiability with which Marmaduke receives my remark speedily reassures me.

'Yes,' he says, with energy, 'it never looks so well as just at this time of year.'

'So I should think.'

A long pause.

'English scenery is always at its best in the autumn. After all there is no place like England—I mean, of

course, for a continuance. Don't you agree with me, darling ?'

'I do indeed. Dear Briersley Wood ! How fond Billy and I were of it ! You remember that clump of nut-trees, 'Duke ?'

'Is it likely I should forget it ?' sentimentally. 'For my own part, I think the wood at the other side of Strangemore handsomer than Briersley ; but of course it was too far away from Summerleas for you to know it well.'

Another pause, longer than the last, and more eloquent.

'How I should like to see it—*now* !' I murmur, with faint emphasis and an heroically suppressed sigh.

'Would you really ?' rising eagerly, and coming into the embrasure of the window. 'Would you like to get back, darling ? Not yet for a little while, of course,' with quick correction, 'but later on, when——'

'I would like to start at once,' I cry, frankly, flinging hesitation to the winds ; 'as soon as possible. I am longing to see everyone ; and you know, 'Duke,' sweetly, 'I have yet to make a near acquaintance with—*our* home.'

I smile up at him, and am satisfied my words have caused nothing but the extremest content.

'Very good. It is easily arranged ; and next year we can come and get through what we now leave undone. They must be wanting us at home, I fancy—there are the birds and everything,' concludes Marmaduke, in a reflective tone, which is the nearest approach to a return of reason he has yet shown.

We spend a fortnight in London on our way back, when I am presented to some of my husband's relations. His sister, Lady Handcock, I do not see, as she has been in Canada for the last two years with Sir James ; and though now travelling homewards and expected every day, does not arrive during our stay in the Great Babylon.

Cousins and aunts and friends, however, are numerous, and for the most part so kind that restraint vanishes; and I tell myself people-in-law are not so formidable as I have been led to believe. One thorn, however, remains amongst my roses and pricks me gently.

Lady Blanche Going—with whom we stay a week—of all the cousins interests me most; though it must be confessed the interest is of a disagreeable nature. She has a charming house in Park Lane, and the softest, most fascinating manners; she is in every point such as a well-bred woman ought to be, yet with her alone I am not happy. For the most part looking barely twenty-five, there are times—odd moments when the invariable smile is off her face—when I could fancy her at least seven years older. Now and then, too, a suspicious gleam—*too* warm, as coming from a decorous matron—falls from her sleepy almond-shaped eyes upon some favourite amongst the ‘stronger’ set, and I cannot forgive her in that she makes me appear the most unsophisticated, childish bride that ever left a nursery. So that I am glad when we leave her and move further south to our beautiful home.

Oh! the delight, the rapture of the first meeting, when, the first day after our return, I drive over to Summerleas! The darling mother’s tearful welcome, the ‘boy Bill’s’ more boisterous one. Even Dora for a moment or two forgets her elegance and her wrongs and gives me a hearty embrace. And how well I am looking, and how happy! And how pretty my dress is, and how becoming! And how they have all missed me! And just fancy! Roland is *really* engaged to the ‘old boy’s’ daughter after all; and the colonel himself writes about it as though quite pleased, in spite of her having such a good fortune. Though, indeed, why should he not, for where could he find anyone handsomer or dearer or more charming than our Roly? and so on.

All too swift in its happiness flies the day, and



Marmaduke comes to reclaim me. Yet the strange sense of rest and completeness that fills me, in the presence of the old beloved, distresses me. Why can I not feel for Marmaduke that romantic, all-sufficing devotion of which I have read? I certainly *like* him immensely. He is everything of the dearest and best, and kind almost to a fault; therefore I ought to adore him; but somehow I cannot quite make up my mind to it. One should love a husband better than all the rest of the world put together—so I have heard, so I believe—but do I?

I lay little plans; I map out small scenes to try how far my affection for my husband will go.

For instance, I picture to myself Billy or he condemned to start in the morning for Australia, never to return; one or other must go, and the decision rests with me. Which shall I let go, which shall I keep? I send Marmaduke, and feel a deep pang at my heart; I send Billy—the pang becomes keenest torture.

Again, supposing both to be sentenced to death: and supposing also it is in my power to save one of them—which would I rescue? Marmaduke, of course! I haul him triumphantly from his gloomy cell, but as I do so my Billy's beautiful eyes, filled with mute despair, shine upon me from out the semi-darkness, and I cease to drag Marmaduke—I cannot leave my brother.

When this last picture first presents itself to my vivid imagination I am in bed, and the idea overcomes me to such a degree that I find myself presently in floods of tears, unable altogether to suppress my sobs.

In a minute or two Marmaduke wakes and turns uneasily.

‘What is the matter, Phyllis?’ he asks, anxiously. ‘Is anything wrong with you, my darling?’

‘No, no, nothing,’ I answer, hastily, and bury my nose in the pillow.

‘But you are crying,’ he remonstrates, reaching out a kindly hand in the darkness that is meant for my face,

but alights unexpectedly upon the back of my head. 'Tell me what is troubling you, my pet.'

'Nothing at all,' I say again; 'I was only thinking.' Here I stifle a foolish sigh, born of my still more foolish tears.

'Thinking of what?'

'Of Billy,' I reply, reluctantly. And then, though he says nothing, and though I cannot see his face, I know my husband is offended.

He goes back to his original position, and is soon again asleep, while I lie awake for half an hour longer, worrying my brain with trying to discover what there can be to vex Marmaduke in my weeping over Billy.

Still I am happy—utterly so, as one must be who is without care or sorrow, whose lightest wish meets instant fulfilment; and less and less frequently am I haunted by the vague fear of ingratitude—by the thought of how poor a return I make for all the good showered upon me, as I see how sufficient I am for my husband's happiness; while only on rare occasions does he betray his passionate longing for a more perfect hold upon my heart by the suppressed but evident jealousy with which he regards my love for my family.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

'Who would you like to invite here for the shooting?' asks Marmaduke, one morning at breakfast, to my consternation. 'I suppose we had better fill the house?'

'Oh, 'Duke,' I cry, in terror, 'must you do that? And must I entertain them all?'

'I suppose so,' replies he, laughing; 'though I daresay if you will let them alone they will entertain themselves. If you get a good many men and women

together they generally contrive to work out their own amusement.'

'I have seen so few people in my life,' I say, desperately, 'and none of them grand people. That is, lords, I mean, and that. I shall be frightened out of my life.'

'My acquaintance with lords is not so extensive as you seem to imagine. I know a few other people. We will limit the lords, if you wish it.'

'Baronets and very rich people are just as bad.'

'Nonsense, darling. I will be here to help you if they grow very dangerous and get altogether beyond control.'

'Oh, that is all very well,' I say, feeling inclined to cry, 'but you will be out shooting all day, and I will be left at home to speak to them. I don't mind the men so much, but the women will be dreadful.'

This last sentence appears to afford Marmaduke the liveliest amusement. He laughs until I begin to feel really hurt at his want of sympathy.

'You don't care for me,' I cry, with petulant reproach, 'or you would not try to make me so unhappy.'

'My darling child, how can you say so? Unhappy! because a few people are kind enough to come and pay you a visit. You say I do not "care for you" because I ask you to be civil to two or three women!' Here he laughs again a little, though evidently against his will. 'Oh, Phyllis! if you are going to cry I will not say another word about it. Come, look up, my pet, and I promise to forget our friends for this autumn at least. We will spend it by ourselves; though I must confess'—regretfully—'it seems to me a sin to leave all those birds in peace. Now, are you satisfied?'

But I am not; I am only ashamed of myself. Is this childish fear of strangers the proper spirit for a grown-up married woman to betray? I dry my eyes and make a secret determination to go through with it, no matter what it costs me.

‘No, no,’ I say, heroically, ‘let them come. It is very stupid of me to feel nervous about it. I daresay I shall like them all immensely when they are once here; and—and—perhaps they too will like me.’

‘Small doubt of that,’ says my husband, heartily. ‘I only hope the men won’t get beyond the liking. Phyllis, you are a darling, and when they leave us you shall tell me how tremendously you enjoyed it all.’

I am not sufficient hypocrite to coincide with this hopeful idea. I kill a sigh before I next speak.

‘Duke,’ I say, with faltering tongue, ‘must I sit at the head of the table?’

‘Of course,’ again visibly amused. ‘Surely you would not like to sit at the bottom?’

‘No,’ with deep dejection; ‘one is as bad as the other. In either place I shall be horribly conspicuous.’ Then, after a brief hesitation, and with a decided tendency to fawn upon him: ‘Marmaduke, we will have all the things handed round—won’t we, now? I shall never have anything to carve, shall I?’

‘Never,’ replies ‘Duke; ‘you shall give us dinner in any earthly style you choose, always provided you let us have a good one. There!’

‘And Parsons will see to that,’ I say, partially consoled, drawing my breath more lightly.

‘Now, who shall we ask?’ says ‘Duke, seating himself and drawing out a pencil and pocket-book with an air of business, while I look over his shoulder. ‘Harriet is staying with old Sir William at present, but next week she will be free. She will come, and James. I am so anxious you should meet each other.’

‘Oh, Marmaduke, what shall I do if your sister does not like me? It would make me so miserable if she disapproved of me in any way.’

‘Your modesty, my dear, is quite refreshing in this brazen age. Of course if Harriet expresses disapprobation of my choice I shall sue for a divorce.’

I pinch his ear and perch myself on the arm of his chair.

‘Is she anything like you?’

‘You could hardly find a greater contrast, I should say, in every way. She is extremely fair—quite a blonde—not much taller than you are, and rather fat. She has a considerable amount of spirit, and keeps Sir James in great order; while I am a dejected being, tyrannised over by the veriest little shrew that ever breathed.’

‘I like that! But from what you say she must be a terrible person.’

‘Then my description belies her. Harriet is very charming and a general favourite. As for Sir James, he simply adores her. I daresay she will bring Bébé with her.’

‘Who is Bébé?’

‘Bébé Beatoun? Oh, Handcock’s niece, and Harriet’s “most cherished.” Fortunately her mother is at present in Italy, so *she* can’t come, which is lucky for us all, as she is a *dame terrible*. Then we must ask Blanche Going.’

‘Oh, *must* you ask her?’ I exclaim, discontentedly. ‘I don’t think I quite like her; she is so supercilious, and seems to consider me so—so *young*.’

‘Is that a fault? I never met anyone with such a veneration for age as you have. I tell you, Phyllis, there is nothing on earth so desirable as youth. Be glad of it while you have it—it never lasts. I daresay Blanche herself would not mind taking a little of it off your hands, if—she only could.’

‘I don’t think so; she rather gave me the impression that she looked down upon me, as though I were foolish and not worth much consideration.’

‘Don’t be uncharitable, Phyllis; she could not think anything so absurd. Besides, she told me herself one day she liked you immensely—hoped you and she would

be tremendous friends, and so on. Blanche is too good-natured to treat anyone as you say.'

'Perhaps so. But really, now, Marmaduke—seriously, I mean—would you not wish me to be older? Say twenty-five or so, with a little more knowledge of everything, you know? And, in fact, I mean would it not be better if I were more a woman of the world?'

'Oh, horror of horrors!' cries 'Duke, raising his hands in affected terror. 'How can you suggest anything so cruel? If I were married to a fashionable woman I would either cut and run or commit suicide in six months.'

'Then you really think me——' I hesitate.

'A veritable little goose. No, no—perfection, I mean,' seeing me pout. Then suddenly putting his arms round me and drawing me down to him, he whispers, with deep feeling, 'Phyllis, my darling, darling girl, don't you know it? Must I tell it you over and over again? Cannot you see every hour of your life how fondly I love you, just for what you are? And *you*, Phyllis, tell me—do *you*——' He stops abruptly and regards me with a curious earnestness for a minute; then, laughing rather constrainedly, puts me gently back from him and goes on: 'What other guests shall we name? Mark Gore—would you care for him?'

'Yes; I liked what I saw of him. And Dora, Marmaduke.'

'Dora, of course. And some one to meet her, I suppose? Who shall we say? I think George Ashurst is an eligible who would just suit her. He is not exactly brilliant, but he is thoroughly good-hearted, and a baronet, with unlimited coin.'

'I don't think Dora would like him if he is stupid,' I say, doubtfully.

'Oh, he is not a fool, if you mean that; and he has as many golden charms as would make a duller man clever.'

‘Ah! who is mercenary now?’ I say, lifting a finger of conviction.

‘Am I? You see what comes of marrying a *man* of the world. Now, had you seen as much life as I have you might be equally unpleasant.’

‘But *I* don’t think you unpleasant, ‘Duke.’

‘Don’t you. There is consolation to be found in that. And now who would *you* like to invite, darling?’

‘I would like Billy,’ I say, disconsolately; ‘but he never is in the way when wanted, like other boys. And Roly is in Ireland, by special desire, of course. And I would like mother, only——’

‘Perhaps you would like the whole family?’ says my husband, mildly.

‘Yes, I would,’ I return, with alacrity, ‘every’—I am going to say ‘manjack of them;’ but thinking this—though purest English to Billy’s ears—may be considered vulgar by mere outsiders, check myself in time, and substitute the words ‘every one of them,’ rather lamely. ‘All, that is, except papa: I doubt he could be amiable for two hours together. But where is the use in wishing for what I cannot have?’

‘We could get Billy for a week, I daresay, later on,’ says Marmaduke, kindly, ‘while the rest are here, if only to keep you from despair. Is there anyone else?’

‘No; papa looked upon friends as nightmares, so we have none. Besides, I shall have quite enough to do making myself agreeable to those you have named. I only hope they will not worry me into an early grave.’

‘Well, then, I suppose, with two or three spare men, this list will do?’

‘Don’t you think you are asking a great many?’

‘No; very few, it seems to me; at least, barely enough to make the house warm. Here is a tip for you, Phyllis: when making up your mind to invite people to stay with you always ask a good many together, as the more there are the easier it will be to amuse them, and much trouble is taken off the shoulders

of the poor little hostess. Bébé you will like, she is so gay and bright ; everyone is fond of her.'

'How old is she?'

'Very young—not more than nineteen or twenty, and she looks almost as young as you. She will suit you, and help you to do the honours. The only thing that can be said against Bébé is, she is such an incorrigible little flirt. Do not learn that accomplishment from her.'

'How shall I be able to help it, if you throw me in the way of it? I think you are acting foolishly,' with a wise shake of my head. 'What if one of these "spare men" should chance to fall in love with me?'

'That would be a mere bagatelle to *your* falling in love with one of the "spare men."

'I see nothing to prevent that either.'

'Don't you?' Then, half-earnestly, taking my face between his hands, 'You would not do that, Phyllis, would you?'

'No, I think not,' I say, lightly, letting him have his kiss without rebuke ; 'I feel no desire to be a flirt. It must be an awful thing, as it seems to me, to have two or three men in love with you at the same time. I find *one* bad enough'—maliciously—'and that is what it comes to, is it not?'

'I suppose so, if one is a successful coquette.'

'Well,' I say, springing to my feet, 'I only hope Dora will get a good husband out of all this turmoil, if only to recompense me for the misery I am going to endure.'

## CHAPTER XIX.

**DURING** the morning of the day on which Lady Handcock is expected to arrive I feel strangely nervous and unsettled. I don't seem to care so much for anyone's good opinion as for hers. If Marmaduke's sister refuses



to like me I shall take it very hardly indeed, and I do not dare to flatter myself that it may be otherwise. Probably she will be cold and haughty and indifferent, like the generality of grand dames, or, worse still, supercilious and filled with a well-bred mockery only half-concealed, like Lady Blanche Going.

As she has written to say they will not arrive until five o'clock I put on my outdoor things after luncheon and wander forth alone in search of such good spirits and a frame of mind so altogether radiant as shall help me to conquer fate towards evening. As at four o'clock, however, I retrace my steps I am by no means certain I have found anything beyond a brilliant colour.

I cross the threshold and move towards the staircase with the laudable intention of robing myself for conquest before their coming, when to my consternation I am met by Tynon, the butler, with the pleasing intelligence that 'Sir James and Lady Handcock and Miss Beatoun' have already arrived.

Have entered my doors with no hostess to receive them or bid them welcome! What *will* they think? How awkward it has proved my going for that stupid walk!

I smother a groan, fling my hat at Tynon, and just as I am, with my hair slightly disarranged, enter the drawing-room.

At the upper end stands Marmaduke, laughing and talking gaily to a fair-haired, prettily-dressed woman, who, in a lower class of existence, might be termed 'buxom.' To say she is inclining towards *embonpoint* will, however, sound less shocking to ears polite. I have heard from my husband that she is about thirty years of age, but in the quick glance I take at her I decide she might be any age under that, she is so white and soft and gay.

'Oh! here she is,' says 'Duke, gladly, as I enter.

'I am so sorry!' I murmur, with a rising colour,

coming quickly forward, 'but we did not expect you until five o'clock.'

As I advance so does she, and when we meet she lays two small plump jewelled hands upon my shoulders.

'It was all my fault,' she says, smiling. 'When you know me better you will understand that I cannot *help* being in a hurry. However, you must forgive me this time, as my appearing at this hour is in itself a flattery, proving how impatient I was to see you.' Then, regarding me attentively: 'Why, what a child!' she cries; 'what a baby! and what delicious eyes! Really, Marmaduke, I hardly know whether most to congratulate or—pity you.'

She speaks with a curiously pretty accent, putting an emphasis on every third or fourth word that fascinates and pleases the listener.

'*Pity!*' return I, amazedly, making an unsuccessful effort to elude her firm grasp, while the indignant colour flames into my cheeks. 'You speak as if—*why* should you *pity* him?'

'Because, cannot you fancy what a life you are going to lead him!' says her ladyship, with a little arch laugh that wrinkles up all her Grecian nose. 'Child, I too have eyes, and I can see mischief written in every line of your—*ugly* little face.'

I try to feel angry, but cannot. It is in her power to make every word she utters an undeveloped compliment. I succumb at once and for ever, and give myself up to her merry but true-hearted influence. Putting my frowns in my pocket, I laugh.

'If you keep on saying these things before 'Duke,' I say, 'he will find me out, and perhaps in time repent his bargain.'

Here I make a little *moue* at my husband, who is standing rather behind his sister, which he returns with interest.

'How do you know I have not found you out long ago? It is my belief I married you for my sins.'

Harriet, I leave her now in your hands: reform her—if you can.’

‘Go and look after James,’ says Lady Handcock. ‘He always gets into mischief when left by himself. I want to make friends with Phyllis.’

By and by Miss Beatoun comes in, and I get through another introduction.

She is hardly as tall as I am, and wonderfully pretty. No need to disbelieve the report that last season all men raved of her. Her eyes are large and dark and soft, her hair a very light brown, though hardly golden, and guiltless of dye. A tiny black mole, somewhat like a Queen Anne’s patch, grows close to her left ear.

As I look at her I decide hastily she is *more* than pretty—she is attractive. Her whole face is full of light; the very corners of her mouth express unuttered laughter; it is altogether the most *riante*, kissable, lovable face conceivable. Her hands and feet are fairy-like in their proportions.

Nevertheless her eyes, though unusually soft, betray the coquette; they cannot entirely conceal the mischievous longing for mastery that lurks in their velvet depths.

‘Is she not young, Bébé?’ asks Lady Handcock, indicating me.

‘*Very*. Much younger even than I dared to hope. Of course’—to me—‘we all heard you were *quite* a girl; yet that did not reassure me, as it can be said of most brides, and as a rule they are a disagreeable lot. But you have forgotten to give yourself airs, and that is so novel and delightful—so many young women *will* go in for that sort of thing. I feel,’ says Miss Beatoun, gaily, ‘I am going to have a delicious autumn, and to be very happy.’

‘I hope so,’ I answer, earnestly. ‘Do you know, Lady Handcock, I quite dreaded your coming—it kept

me awake several nights, thinking perhaps you would be cold and difficult, and would not like me; and now I am *so* relieved—you cannot fancy what a weight is off my mind.'

I say this with such evident feeling that they both laugh heartily, and Bébé gives it as her opinion that I am a 'regular darling.'

'But you must not call me Lady Handcock,' corrects my sister-in-law. 'My name is Harriet, or Harry, for the most part. I do not want to be made an old woman just yet, though Bébé *will* tell everyone I am her aunt, instead of saying James is her uncle.'

'It is the only hold I have over her, you see,' explains Bébé, 'and I keep it as a threat. But for knowing I have it in my power to say that, she would be under no control. And with mamma so given to itinerant habits, and Harry being my natural *chaperon*, I have to protect myself as best I may.'

By dinner-hour our party is still further enlarged by Dora, Mark Gore, and Sir George Ashurst, a very fair young man, with an aquiline nose, plump face, and long white moustache. He at once impresses me with the belief that he is thoroughly good-natured and altogether incapable of ill-temper of any kind. Perhaps, indeed, if he were to smile a little less frequently, and show some symptoms of having an opinion of his own, it would be an improvement. But what will you? One cannot have everything. And he is chatty and agreeable, and I manage to spend my evening very comfortably in his society.

The next day Captain Jenkins and Mr. Powell, from the Barracks at Chillington, put in an appearance; and a very youthful gentleman, with a calm and cherubic countenance, arrives from London. This latter is in the Hussars, and is full of a modest self-appreciation very much to be admired.

'Well, Chips, so you have come, in spite of all your

engagements,' says Marmaduke, slapping this fair-haired warrior affectionately upon the shoulder. (His correct name is John Chippinghall Thornton; but his friends and brother officers having elected to call him 'Chips' or 'Chip,' he usually goes by that appellation. Though *why* I have never been able to fathom, as it would be a too palpable flattery to regard this very erratic young man as a 'chip of the old block,' his father being a peculiarly mild and inoffensive clergyman, residing in a Northern village.)

'What did Lady Emily say to your defection, and Maudie Greene, and Carry, and all the rest of your friends?'

'Oh, I say, now,' says Master Chips, with an ingenuous blush, 'it isn't fair to show me up in this light—is it?—and before Mrs. Carrington too. She will have no opinion of me if she listens to all *you* say.'

'I am only anxious to hear how you tore yourself away from their fascinations.'

'Yes, do tell us, Mr. Thornton,' say I. 'We are so afraid that you have sacrificed yourself to oblige us.'

'Don't you believe a word Marmaduke says, Mrs. Carrington—he is always representing me falsely. I shall be unhappy for ever if you won't understand how proud and charmed I was to receive your invitation. Just to show you how he exaggerates, the Carrie and Maud he spoke of are my cousins, and that's the same as sisters, you know.'

'Only far more dangerous,' I return, laughing.

'Well, at all events they have every one gone off to Germany or country houses—so they must do without me—I couldn't go trotting after 'em everywhere, you know—do enough of that in the spring to last the year. And besides, I don't much care for any of that lot now.'

'No? Tired of them already? What a desperate Don Juan! Really, Chips, I shudder to think where you will end. And who is the idol of the present hour—something more exquisite still?'

‘Not to be named in the same day,’ says Mr. Thornton, confidently. ‘Fact is she is a sort of connection of your own. Met her last season in town, you know, and—er—’—an eloquent sigh—‘I mean Miss Beatoun.’

Marmaduke bursts out laughing, and so do I.

‘Then you are all right,’ says ‘Duke. ‘With your usual luck you have fallen upon your feet. At this instant the same roof covers you and your *innamorata*.’

‘No!’ cries Chips, eagerly. ‘You don’t mean it? Of course you are only joking. You’re not in earnest, now, Marmaduke—are you?’

‘Seeing is believing,’ returns ‘Duke. ‘But if you don’t go and dress yourself this very moment you will get no dinner, and lose a good chance of exercising your fascinations upon Miss Beatoun.’

Later on he takes her in to dinner and is supremely happy; while Messieurs Jenkins and Powell, who have reached their thirty-third year, look on aghast at the young one’s ‘cheek.’ They are estimable men, and useful in their own way, but refuse to shine in conversation. I *think* they like each other—I am quite *sure* they like Marmaduke, who draws them out in a wonderful manner, and makes them marvel at their own unwonted brilliancy; while Harriet aids and abets him by her gaiety.

At my right hand sits Sir James, a tall, distinguished-looking man, with hair of iron-grey, and deep-set eyes. He is grave and remarkably silent—such an utter contrast to his laughter-loving wife! of whom he never appears to take the smallest notice. To me it is a matter of amazement how he can so systematically ignore her, as he seldom addresses to her a word or lets his eyes rest upon her for any length of time.

But for Marmaduke’s assertion that they adore each other I would be inclined to think them at daggers

drawn, or at least indifferent; and it is only now and then when she speaks to him, and I see his eyes light up and smile and soften, that I can accept the gentler idea.

Not to his wife alone, however, is he reserved; all the rest of the world he treats in a similar manner, and I come to the conclusion he abhors talking and is a man with no settled taste or pursuits. Hearing, indeed, that his one passion is hunting, I broach the subject cautiously; and feeling certain of making a score, express myself desirous of being informed as to the express nature of a 'bullfinch.'

'Explanations always fall short,' is his reply. 'Some day when we are out I will *show* you one. That will be best.'

So my ignorance remains unenlightened, and as he calmly returns to his dinner I do the same, and abandon all hopes of hearing him converse.

Dora is doing the amiable to Sir George Ashurst. Anything so simple or innocent as Dora in her white dress and coral ribbons could hardly be conceived. I am admiring her myself with all my heart and wondering how it is she does it; and I fancy Sir Mark Gore is doing the same. Once, as she raises the childish, questioning blue eyes to her companion's face, and murmurs some pretty speech in her soft treble, I see Sir Mark smile openly. It is only a momentary merriment, however, as directly afterwards he turns to me, suave and charming as ever.

'How becoming white is to your sister!' he says. 'It suits her expression so wonderfully. I don't know how it is, but the word *ingénue* always comes to me when I look at her.'

'She is very pretty,' I return, coldly. I have not yet quite decided on the nature of that smile.

'You do her an injustice. Surely she is more than "pretty"—a word that means so little in these degenerate days. If I were an artist I should like to

paint her as "Moonlight," with a bunch of lilies in her hands, and just that dress she is now wearing—*without* the ribbons—and a little stream running at her feet. I have seldom seen so sweet an expression. One could hardly fancy an unkind word coming from those lips or a hidden motive in her heart.'

I think of our 'Moonlight's' designs upon Marmaduke and the man who is now so loud in her praise. I think of the many and energetic *fracas* between her and Billy, and am silent. I don't know why, but I am positive Sir Mark is amused. I colour and look up.

'What ages ago it seems since last we met!' says he, promptly.

'Ages? No, months. It was last June we met, I think—and here.'

'Oh, that was only the barest glimpse; one could hardly call it a meeting. I was referring to my visit to the Leslies two years ago. You remember that little scene in the High Street, at Carston?'

I laugh merrily.

'I do indeed. But for you the *finale* would have been *too* ignominious. I shall always owe you a debt of gratitude for your timely appearance. The saddle turned, I recollect, exactly opposite the Bank, and I had a horrid vision of two or three young men gazing at me in eager expectation from some of the windows.'

'Yes; and then we met again, and——Shall I peel one of these for you?'

'Please.'

'And I flattered myself you treated me with some degree of graciousness; flattered myself so far that I presumed to send you a little volume of poems I had heard you wish for, and which—you returned. That was rather cruel, was it not?'

'I have always *felt* how rude you must have thought me on that occasion,' I reply, blushing hotly. 'I did so long to tell you all about it, but could not. It was not my fault, however—I confess I would have kept it



if possible—it was papa. He said you should not have sent it, and insisted on its being returned.’

‘Well, perhaps he was right. Yet it was a very harmless and innocent little volume after all, containing only the mildest sentiments. (Is that a good one?)’

‘(Very good, thank you.) It was Tennyson’s “Idyls”—I remember perfectly; and it was filled with the prettiest illustrations. Oh, I was so sorry to part with that little book! Do you know I was silly enough to cry the day I posted it back to you.’

Sir Mark regards me earnestly, almost curiously. I am laughing at my own past folly, but he does not even smile in sympathy.

‘I am sorry any act of mine should have cost you a tear,’ he says, slowly. ‘But why did you not write a line to explain all this to me when sending it?’

‘*Fancy* the iniquity of such a thing! The very suggestion would have brought down untold wrath upon my poor head. To ask permission to write a letter to a gentleman! Oh, horror!’

‘And you would not—but no, of course you would not,’ says Sir Mark, rather unintelligibly.

And then I glance at Lady Handcock, and she glances at me. Sir Mark rises to open the door, and I smile and nod gaily at him as I cross the threshold and pass into the lighted hall.

We are all beginning to know each other well, and to be mutually pleased with each other, when, towards the close of the week, Lady Blanche Going joins our party. She is looking considerably handsomer than when last I saw her in town, and is apparently in good humour with herself and all the rest of the world. How long this comfortable state of affairs may last, however, remains a mystery. She brings with her a horse, a pet poodle, and a *very* French maid, who makes herself extremely troublesome, and causes much dissension in the servants’ hall.

Sir Mark Gore and her ladyship are evidently old friends, and express a well-bred amount of pleasure on again meeting. Perhaps her ladyship's expressions are by a shade the warmest.

'I had no idea I should meet you here,' she winds up, sweetly, when the subject of her satisfaction is exhausted. 'Mrs. Carrington, when alluding to her other guests, never mentioned your name.'

'No? Mrs. Carrington, how unkind of you to dismiss me so completely from your thoughts? "Never to mention my name!" It is horrible to picture oneself so totally forgotten.'

'You could not surely hope to be *always* in my thoughts?' I answer, lightly.

Her ladyship flashes a sharp glance at us from her long dark eyes.

'I might not *expect* it, certainly; but I am not to be blamed if I cannot help hoping for anything so desirable.'

'Vain hope!' return I, saucily, 'and a foolish one besides. Have you never heard that "familiarity breeds contempt"? and that "too much of anything is good for nothing"? Were I to keep you perpetually in my mind I might perhaps end by hating you.'

'What an appalling idea!' murmurs Lady Blanche, softly, speaking in that peculiar tone of half-suppressed irony I so greatly detest. 'Should anything so dreadful ever occur I doubt if Sir Mark would recover it.'

'I don't suppose I should,' replies Sir Mark, rather bluntly, as it seems to me, without turning his head in her direction.

There is a moment's rather awkward pause, and then her ladyship laughs lightly, and, crossing the room, sits down by B     Beatoun.

Her laugh is an unpleasant one, and jars upon me painfully. Her very manner of rising and leaving me alone with Sir Mark has something in it so full of insolent meaning that for the instant I hate her. She

makes me feel I have said something foolish—something better left unsaid, though thoroughly unmeant. I colour, bite my lip, and without another word to my companion, who is looking black as night, I go out through the open window.

So for the second time the little thorn enters into my heart and pricks me gently. A seed is sown that bears me bitter fruit.

## CHAPTER XX.

NOBODY seems to mind me in the least (as a hindrance to their rather open flirtations), though, with the exception of Lady Blanche, all my guests appear prepossessed in my favour.

I am no good at all as a *chaperon*—looking at that necessary evil in the light of a guardian of morals—as no one, I feel utterly positive, would listen to a word of advice given by me, even had I the courage to speak that word, which I feel sure I have not.

‘Tell you why I like you so much,’ says Bébé to me, one day, with charming candour (we have become great friends by this time): ‘you have so little of the married woman about you. You don’t look the thing at all. Nobody would feel in the least put out if *you* caught them doing anything, even a little bit *fi-fi*. You’d be afraid to scold, and you are too good-natured to “peach.” Now, there’s mamma: *her* eyes strike terror to the hearts of the girls she *chaperons*. Only let her catch you, with your hand in the possession of any Detrimental, however delightful, and it is all up with you half an hour later.’

‘But I suppose your mother is right. I shall remember what you say, and take her as a model from this day forth.’

‘It isn’t *in* you. You would make a horrible mess

of it; and you are infinitely nicer as you are. A strong stare is a necessary ingredient, and you don't possess that. You should be able to wither with a look. I hate being scolded, and I would back mamma, once started, to hold her own against any of those Billingsgate ladies one hears of. I assure you the amount of vituperation our night brougham has concealed about its person is enough, one would think, to turn the colour of its cloth. No doubt that is why it requires doing up so very often.'

'You don't seem any the better for all the indignation.'

'No, that is just it. That shows the folly of wasting so much valuable breath. I am a born flirt, and as such I hope I'll die. There! that is extra naughty, is it not? So, out of respect for you, I will unsay it, and hope instead I may depart this life a calm and decorous matron.'

'Do you know I never had a flirtation in my life?' I say, almost regretfully.

'No? really! How absurd!' says Bébé, bursting into a much-amused laugh. 'That is just what makes you the curious, dear, darling little child you are. But you need not be so poverty-stricken any longer unless you please, as anyone can see how *épris* with you is Sir Mark Gore.'

'Nonsense!' cry I, blushing furiously. 'How can you say anything so untrue! I have known him this ever so long; he is quite an old friend.'

'And a *fast* friend,' says Bébé, laughing again at her own wit. 'Having waited so long, you do right to begin your campaign with a seasoned veteran.'

'You must not say such things; if you do I shall rouse myself and assert my authority as a very dragon amongst *chaperons*; and then where will you and Captain Jenkins and Master Chips be?'

'No, don't,' entreats Bébé, pretending to be frightened. 'As you now are you are perfection; were

you to change you would not be Phyllis Carrington at all. When I marry I intend taking you as an example, and so make myself dear to the hearts of all my spinster friends.'

'And when will that be, Bébé?'

A shade crosses and darkens her face. For a moment she looks sad; then it disappears, and she laughs gaily.

'Never, probably. I don't get the chance. Generally, when I pay my autumn visits, I live in a state of constant dread of being pounced upon by officious matrons, just as I am going in for an hour of thorough enjoyment with a man who has not a penny on earth besides his pay. But here it is different. *You* would never pounce, my Phyllis, would you? You would make a delightful clitter-clatter, with those little high-heeled shoes of yours, long before you turned the corner—there is nothing mean or prowling about you. Phyllis, is all that hair really your own? I won't believe it till I see it. Let me pull it down and do it up again for you in a new style, will you? I am tremendously good at hair-dressing, really. Harry says I am better than her French maid. When all trades fail, and I am a lonely old maid, I shall bind myself to a barber.'

With that she pulls my hair all about my shoulders, and makes me endure untold tortures for at least three-quarters of an hour.

Meantime Dora is improving the shining hours with Sir George Ashurst. She is making very fast and likely running, that looks as if it meant to make the altar-rails its goal.

As for her victim, he has neither eyes nor tongue nor ears for anyone but Dora, and success lends enchantment to my sister's face and form. Always pretty, she has gained from the excitement of the contest an animation hitherto unknown, that adds considerably to her charms.

I experience little throbs of satisfaction and delight

as I contemplate this promising flirtation ; though as yet I do not dare to think of marriage as its probable termination. I long intensely to discuss the subject with Dora, to learn how far I may beguile myself with hope ; but one day, having touched upon it very delicately, I am met with such an amount of innocent blankness as effectually deters me from making any further attempt.

Nevertheless, speak of it I must, or die ; and, coming upon Marmaduke suddenly, directly after receiving Dora's rebuff, I proceed with much caution to sound him about the matter.

He is in his own private den, a little room devoted to rubbish, and containing a motley collection of pipes, guns, whips, actresses (for the most part decent), and spurs. As I enter he is bending over some new favourite amongst the guns, and is endeavouring, with the assistance of the largest pin I ever saw, to pick dust from some intricate crevice. He is crimson, either from stooping or anxiety—I don't know which, though I incline towards the latter opinion—as on seeing me he says, irritably—

‘Phyllis, have you a small pin? I cannot think,’ flinging the large one angrily from him, ‘why they choose to make them this size: they are not of the smallest use to any fellow who wants to clean a gun.’

‘They may have been designed for some other purpose,’ I suggest, meekly, producing a more reasonably-sized pin, which he seizes with avidity, and returns to his task.

I seat myself near him, and for a few minutes content myself with watching the loving care he bestows upon his work. No careless servant's hands should touch those new and shining barrels.

‘Marmaduke,’ I say at length, ‘I don't think Sir George so very stupid.’

‘Don't you, darling?’ absently.

‘No. Why did you say he was?’

‘*Did* I say it?’ Evidently every idea he possesses is centred in that absurd gun.

‘Dear me, ‘Duke, of course you did,’ I cry, impatiently. ‘You told me he was not “brilliant,” and that means the same thing. Don’t you remember?’

‘Well, *is* he brilliant?’

‘No, but he converses very nicely, and is quite as agreeable as any of the other men, in a general sort of way.’

‘I am very glad you think so. He is a great friend of mine; and after all I don’t suppose it matters in the least a man’s not being able to master his Greek and Latin or failing to take his degree.’

‘Of course not. I daresay he did not put his mind to it. I am convinced had he done so he would have distinguished himself as—as much as anybody.’

‘Just so.’

‘I think’—with hesitation—‘he would suit Dora very well.’

‘I agree with you there; more particularly as Dora is not clever either.’

‘Yes, she is,’ I cry, hotly; ‘she is exceedingly clever. She can do a great deal more than most girls; she can do lots of things that I can’t do.’

‘Can she? But then perhaps you fail in the cleverness also?’

‘I think you are excessively rude and disagreeable, I say, much affronted; and, getting up, move with dignity towards the door.

‘If you see Ashurst tell him I want him,’ calls out Marmaduke as I reach it.

‘Yes; and at the same time I shall tell him you said he was a dunce at college,’ I return, in a withering tone.

Marmaduke laughs; and, dropping the precious gun, runs after me, catches and draws me back into his *sanctum*.

‘I think Dora and Ashurst two of the most intel-

lectual people it has ever been my good fortune to meet,' he says, still laughing, and holding me. 'Will that do? Is your majesty appeased?'

'I wouldn't tell fibs if I were you,' return I, severely.

'Say lies. I hate the word "fib." A lie sounds much more honest. But I am really in earnest when I say I think Dora clever. I know at least twenty girls who have done their best to be made Lady Ashurst, and not one of them ever came as near success as she has.'

'But he has not proposed to her yet.'

'It is the same thing. Anyone can see he has Dora on the brain, and I don't think (asking your pardon humbly) his brain would stand much pressure. I'd lay any amount she has him at her feet before his visit is concluded.'

'How delightful! How pleased mamma will be! Marmaduke, I forgive you. But you must not say slighting things of me again.'

'Slighting things of *you*, my own darling! Cannot you see when I am in fun? I only wanted to make you pout and look like the baby you are. In reality I think you the brightest, dearest, sweetest, *et cetera*.'

Thus my mind is relieved, and I feel I can wait with calmness the desirable end that is evidently in store for Dora.

I am so elated by Marmaduke's concurrence with my hopes that I actually kiss him; and, re-seating myself, consent to take the butt-end of the gun upon my lap and hold it carefully, while he rubs the barrels up and down with a dreadfully dirty piece of scarlet flannel soaked in oil.

When, however, this monotonous process has been continued for ten minutes or so, and I find I cannot flatter myself with the belief that it will soon be over, I lose sight of the virtue called patience.

'Do you think they would ever grow brighter than they are now?' I venture, mildly. 'If you rubbed



them for years, Marmaduke, I don't believe they could be further improved—do you ?'

'Well, indeed, perhaps you are right—I think they will do now,' replies he, regarding his new toy with a fond eye ; and then almost with regret, as though loth to part with it, he replaces it in its flannel berth.

'By-the-by, Phyllis, I had a letter from a friend of mine this morning—Chandos—telling me of his return to England, and I have written inviting him here.'

'Have you ? I hope he is nice—is he Mr. or Captain Chandos, or what ?'

'Neither—he is Lord Chandos.'

'What,' cry I, 'the real live lord at last ! *Now*, I suppose, we will have to be very seemly in our conduct, and forget we ever laughed. Is he very old and staid, 'Duke ?'

'Very. He is a year older than I am ; and I remember you once told me I was bordering on my second childhood, or something like it. However, in reality you will not find Chandos formidable. He has held his honours but a very short time. Last autumn he was only Captain Everett, with nothing to speak of beyond his pay, when fate in the shape of an unsound yacht sailed in, and having drowned one old man and two young ones, pushed Everett into his present position.'

'What a romance ! I suppose one ought to feel sorry for the three drowned men, but somehow I don't. With such a story connected with him, your friend ought to be both handsome and agreeable. Is he ?'

'I don't know. I would be afraid to say. You might take me to task and abuse me afterwards, if our opinions differed. You know *you* think George Ashurst a very fascinating youth. Chandos is a wonderful favourite with women, if that has anything to say to it.'

'Of course it has—everything.'

'I have been thinking,' says 'Duke, 'that, as a set-

off to all the hospitality we have received from the county, we ought to give a ball.'

'A ball! Oh, delicious!' cry I, clapping my hands rapturously. 'What has put such a glorious idea into your head? To dance to a band all down that great big ballroom! Oh, 'Duke! I am so glad I married you!'

'Duke laughs and colours slightly.

'Are you really? Do you mean that? Do you never repent it?'

'Repent it? Never—not for a single instant. How could I, when you are so good to me—when you are always thinking of things to make me happy?'

'I am doubly, trebly rewarded for anything I may have done by hearing such words from your lips. To know you are "glad you married me" is the next best thing to knowing you love me.'

'And so I do love you, you silly boy—I am very, very fond of you. Marmaduke, do you think you could get Billy here for the ball?'

'I will try. I daresay I shall be able to manage it. And now run away and get Blanche Going to help you write out a list of people. She knows everyone in the county, and is a capital hand at anything of that sort.'

'She seems to be a capital hand at most things,' I reply, pettishly, 'except at making herself agreeable to me. It is always Blanche Going can do this, and Blanche Going can do that. She is a paragon of perfection in your eyes, I do believe. I won't ask her to help me. I hate her.'

'Well, ask anyone else you like, then, or no one. But don't hate poor Blanche. What has she done to deserve it?'

'Nothing. But I hate her for all that. I feel like a cat with its fur rubbed up the wrong way whenever I am near her. She has the happy knack of always making me feel small and foolish. I suppose we are antagonistic to each other. And why do you

call her "*poor* Blanche"? I don't see that she is in any need of your pity.'

'Have you not said she has incurred your displeasure? What greater misfortune could befall her?' says 'Duke, smiling tenderly into my cross little face.

I relent, and smile in turn.

'Oh, believe me, she will not die of that,' I say; 'and at all events don't *you* be unhappy, 'Duke,' patting his face softly. 'I shall never hate *you*—be sure of that.'

And then, catching up my train to facilitate my movements, I run through the house in search of Harriet and Bébé, to make known to them my news and discuss with them all the joys and glories of a ball.

Bébé is scarcely less delighted than I am; and all the rest of that day and greater part of the next we spend in arranging and disarranging countless plans.

'It shall be a ball,' says Bébé, enthusiastically, 'such as the county never before attended. We will astonish the natives. We will get men down from London to settle everything, and the decorations and music and supper shall be beyond praise. I know exactly what to do and to order. I have helped Harriet to give balls ever so often, and I am determined, as it will be your first ball as Mrs. Carrington, it shall be a splendid success.'

'My first ball in every way,' I say, feeling rather ashamed of myself. 'I was at several small dances before my marriage, and at a number of dinner parties since, but I never in my life was at a real large ball.'

'What!' cries Bébé, literally struck dumb by this revelation; then, with a little lady-like shout of laughter, 'I never heard of anything half so ludicrous. Why, Phyllis, I am a venerable grandmother next to you. Harriet,' to Lady Handcock, who has just entered, 'just fancy! Phyllis tells me she was never at a ball!'

‘I daresay she is all the better for it,’ says Harriet, kindly, seeing my colour is a little high. ‘If you had gone to fewer you would be a better girl. How did it happen, Phyllis?’

‘No one in our immediate neighbourhood ever gave a ball,’ I hasten to explain, ‘and we did not visit people who lived far away.’ I suppress the fact of our having had no respectable vehicle to convey us to those distant ball-givers, had we been ever so inclined to go. ‘I suppose it appears very odd to you.’

‘Odd!’ cries Bébé; ‘it is abominable. I am so envious I can scarcely bring myself to speak to you. I know exactly what I may expect, while *you* can indulge in the most delightful anticipations. I can remember even now the raptures of *my* first ball—the reality far exceeded even my wildest flights of fancy, and that is a rare thing. Positively I can smell the flowers and hear the music this moment. And then I had so many partners—more, I think, than I get now—I could have filled twenty cards instead of one. Why, Phyllis, I am but two years older than you, and yet, if I had a pound for every ball I have been at, I would have enough money to tide me over my next season without fear of debt.’

My mind—incapable of retaining, even when at its best, more than one idea at a time—is now so filled to overflowing with the thought of this ball that I quite lose sight of our expected visitor, and forget to mention the advent of Lord Chandos. I talk and dream and think of nothing but the coming gaiety.

Nevertheless it causes me keen anxiety. I am conceitedly desirous of looking my best on the eventful night; I am also ambitious of seeming stricken in years, having long ago decided that my juvenile appearance as a married woman is very much against me, and that age brings dignity.

I sit down, and, running over all my dresses in my mind, cannot convince myself that any of them, if

worn, would have the desired effect of adding years to my face and form. My *trousseau*, to be just, was desirable in every way. How she managed it no one could tell, but mother *did* contrive to screw sufficient money out of papa to set me creditably before the world. Still, all my evening robes seem youthful and girlish in the extreme as I call them up one by one.

After a full half-hour of earnest cogitation I make up my mind to a grand purpose, and, stealing downstairs, move rather sneakily to Marmaduke's study. I devoutly trust he will be alone, and as I open the door I find I have my wish.

He is busily writing; but, as he is never too busy to attend to me, he lays down his pen and smiles kindly as he sees me.

'Come in, little woman. What am I to do for you?'

'Marmaduke,' I say, nervously, 'I have come to ask you a great favour.'

'That is something refreshingly new. Do you know it will be the first favour you have asked of me, though we have been married more than three months? Say on, and I swear it shall be yours, whatever it is—to the half of my kingdom.'

'You are quite sure you will not think it queer of me, or—or, shabby?'

'Quite certain.'

'Well, then'—with an effort—'for this ball. I think, Marmaduke, I would like a new dress. May I send to London for it?'

When I have said it, it seems to me so disgracefully soon to ask for new clothes that I blush crimson, and am to the last degree shamefaced.

Marmaduke laughs heartily.

'Is that all?' he says. 'Are you really wasting a blush on such a slight request? What an odd little girl you are! I believe you are the only wife alive who would feel modest about asking such a question. How

much do you want, darling? You will require some other things too, I suppose. Shall I give you a hundred pounds, to see how far it will go? Will that be enough?’

‘Oh, ’Duke! a great deal too much.’

‘Not a bit too much. I don’t know what dresses cost, but I have always heard a considerable sum. And now, as we are on the subject of money, Phyllis, what would you prefer—an allowance,—or money, whenever you want it,—or what?’

‘If you would pay my bills, Marmaduke, I would like it best.’ I have never felt so thoroughly married as at this moment, when I know myself to be dependent on him for every shilling I may spend.

‘Very well. Whatever you like. Any time you tire of this arrangement you can say so. But at all events you will require some pocket-money.’ Rising from the table and going over to a small safe in the wall.

‘No, thank you, ’Duke; I have some.’

‘How much?’

‘Enough, thank you.’

‘Nonsense, Phyllis,’ almost angrily. ‘How absurd you are! One would think I was not your husband. I wish you would try to remember you have a perfect right to everything I possess. Come here directly and take this,’ holding out to me a roll of notes and a handful of gold. ‘Promise me,’ he says, ‘when you want more you will come to me for it. It would make me positively wretched if I thought you were without money to buy whatever you fancy.’

‘But I never had fifty—I never had ten pounds in my life,’ I say half-amused. ‘I won’t know what to do with it.’

‘I wonder if you will have the same story to relate this time next year?’ answered ’Duke, laughing. ‘The very simplest thing to learn is, how to spend money. And now tell me—I confess I have a little curiosity on the subject—what are you going to wear on the twenty-

fourth? You will make yourself look your most charming, will you not, Phyllis?’

‘I shall never be able to look dignified or imposing, if you mean that,’ say I, gloomily. ‘All the old women about the farms who don’t know me think I am a visitor here, and call me “Miss,” just as though I were never married.’

‘That is very sad, especially as you will have to wait so many years for those wrinkles you covet. I daresay a dealer in cosmetics, however, would lay you on a few for the occasion, if you paid him well; and, with one of your grandmother’s gowns, we might perhaps be able to persuade our guests that I had married a woman old enough to be my mother.’

‘I know what I should *like* to wear,’ I say, shyly.

‘What?’

‘Black velvet and the diamonds,’ I say, boldly.

Marmaduke roars.

‘What are you laughing at?’ I ask, testily, somewhat vexed.

‘At the picture you have drawn. At the idea of velvet and diamonds in conjunction with your baby face. Why did you not think of adding on the ermine? Then, indeed, with your height, you would be quite majestic.’

‘But may I wear it? May I—may I?’ ask I impatiently. ‘All my life I have been wanting to wear velvet, and now when I have so good an opportunity do let me.’

‘Is that your highest ambition? By all means, my dear child, gratify it. Why not? Probably in such an effective get-up you will take the house by storm.’

‘I really think I shall look very nice and—*old*,’ I return reflectively. Then: ‘Duke, have you written about Billy?’

‘Yes; I said we wished to have him on the nineteenth for a week; that will bring him in time for the

slaughter on the twentieth. I thought perhaps he might enjoy that.'

'You think of everything. I know no one so kind or good-natured. 'Duke, don't make a joke about that velvet. Don't tell anyone what I said, please.'

'Never fear. I will be silent as the grave. You shall burst upon them as an apparition in all your ancient bravery.'

That evening we dress early, Bébé and I, for no particular reason that I can remember, and, coming downstairs together, seat ourselves before the drawing-room fire to ruin our complexions and have a cosy chat until the others break in upon us. We have discussed many things and expressed various opinions about most of the other guests in the house, until at length we draw breath before entering with vivacity upon some fresh unfortunate. Even as we pause the door at the end of the room is flung wide, and a tall young man coming in walks straight towards me.'

The lamps have not yet been lit, and only the crimson flashes from the blazing fire reveal to us his features. He is dark, rather more distinguished-looking than handsome, and has wonderful deep kind grey eyes.

'Lord Chandos,' announces Tynon in the background, speaking from out the darkness, after which, having played his part, he vanishes.

I rise and go to meet the new-comer, with extended hand.

'This is a surprise, but a pleasant one. I am very glad to bid you welcome,' I say, in a shy old-fashioned manner; but my hand-clasp is warm and genial, and he smiles and looks pleased.

'Thank you. Mrs. Carrington, I suppose?' he says with some faint hesitation, his eyes travelling over my dreadfully youthful form, that looks even more than usually childish to-night in its clothing of white cashmere and blue ribbons.



‘Yes,’ I return, laughing and blushing. ‘Marmaduke should have been here to give us a formal introduction to each other, though indeed it is hardly necessary—I seem to know you quite well from all I have heard about you.’

A slight rustling near the fire—a faint pause, and then Bébé comes forward.

‘How d’ye do, Lord Chandos?’ she says. ‘I hope you have not quite forgotten me.’

She holds out her hand, and for an instant her eyes look fairly into his—*only* for an instant.

She is dressed in some filmy black gown that clings close to her, and has nothing to relieve its gloom save one spot of blood-red colour that rests upon her bosom. Her arms shine bare and white to the elbow; in her hair is another fleck of the blood-red ribbon. Is it the flickering uncertain light or my own fancy that makes her face appear so pale?

Her eyes gleam large and dark, and the curious little black mole lying so close to her ear looks blacker than usual in contrast to her white cheek. But her tone rings gay and steady as ever. A smile quivers round her lips.

I am puzzled, I scarcely know why. I glance at Lord Chandos, and—surely the fire-light to-night is playing fantastic tricks—*his* face appears flushed and anxious. I draw conclusions, but cannot make them satisfactory.

‘I had no idea I should meet you here,’ he says, in a low tone that is studiously polite.

Bébé laughs musically.

‘No? Then we are mutually astonished. I thought you safe in Italy. Certainly it is on my mind that somebody told me you were there.’

‘I returned home last week.’ Then, turning to me, he says, hurriedly: ‘I hope Carrington is well?’

‘Quite well, thank you. Will you come with me to find him? He would have been the first to welcome

you, had he known of your coming, but we did not hope to see you until next week.'

'I had no idea myself I could have been here so soon. But business, luckily, there was none to detain me, so I came straight on to throw myself on your tender mercies.'

We have now reached the library door.

'Marmaduke,' I call out, opening it and entering, 'I have brought you Lord Chandos. Now, are you not surprised and pleased?'

'Oh! more pleased than I can say,' exclaims 'Duke, heartily, coming eagerly forward to greet his friend. 'My dear fellow, what good wind blew you to us so soon?'

When I return to the drawing-room I find the lamps burning cheerily, and most of our party assembled.

Lady Blanche, reclining in a low *fauteuil*, is conversing earnestly with Sir Mark Gore, who stands beside her. Seeing me, she smiles softly at him and motions him to a chair near her. As I move past her trailing skirts a sudden thought of Mons. Rimmel comes to me—the delicatest faintest perfume reaches me. She runs the fingers of one white hand caressingly across her white arm—her every movement is an essence—a grace.

Dora, in her favourite white muslin and sweet demure smile, is holding Mr. Powell and Sir George Ashurst in thrall. She is bestowing the greater part of her attention upon the former, to the disgust and bewilderment of honest George, who looks with moody dislike upon his rival. Both men are intent upon taking her down to dinner. There is little need for you to torture yourself with jealous fears, Sir George. When the time comes it is without doubt upon your arm she will lay that little white pink-tinged hand.

Bébé is sitting upon a sofa, with the infatuated Chips beside her, and is no longer pale—two crimson

spots adorn her cheeks and add brilliancy to her eyes. As I watch her wonderingly she slowly raises her head, and, meeting my gaze, bestows upon me a glance so full of the liveliest reproach, not unmixed with indignation, that I am filled with consternation. What *have* I done to deserve so withering a look?

‘I would give something to know of whom you are thinking just now,’ says a voice at my elbow. ‘Not of *me*, I trust.’

I turn to find Sir Mark is regarding me earnestly. Instinctively I glance at the vacant chair beside Lady Blanche, and in doing so encounter her dark eyes bent on mine. Verily I am not in good odour with my guests to-night.

All through dinner I try to attract Bébé’s attention, but cannot. I address her, only to receive the coldest of replies. Even afterwards, when we get back once more to the drawing-room, I cannot manage an explanation, as she escapes to her own room, and does not again appear until the gentlemen have joined us.

Neither she nor Lord Chandos exchange one word with each other throughout the entire evening. With a sort of feverish gaiety she chatters to young Thornton, to Captain Jenkins, to anyone who may chance to be near her, as though she fears a silence.

Nevertheless the minutes drag. It is the stupidest night we have known, and I begin to wish I had learned whist or chess or something of that sort. I am out of spirits; and though innocent of what it may be, feel myself guilty of some hideous blunder.

Presently the dreaded quiet falls. The whist-players are happy—the rest of us are not. Sir Mark, with grave politeness, comes to the rescue.

‘Perhaps Mr. Thornton will kindly favour us with a song?’ he says, without a smile.

And Mr. Thornton, with a face even more than usually benign, willingly consents, and gives us ‘What will you do, love, when I am going?’—*à propos* of his

approaching departure for India—with much sentimental fervour, and many tender glances directed openly at Miss Beatoun.

‘Thank you,’ murmurs that young lady, when the doleful ditty is finished, having listened to it all through with an air of saddened admiration impossible to describe, and unmistakably flattering. ‘I know no song that touches me so deeply as that.’

‘I know you are laughing at me,’ says Chips, frankly, seating himself again beside her, and sinking his voice to a whisper that he fondly but erroneously believes to be inaudible; ‘but I don’t care. I would rather have you to make fun of me than any other girl to love me!’

Could infatuation further go?

‘Perhaps one might find it possible to do both,’ insinuates Miss Beatoun, wickedly; but this piece of flagrant hypocrisy proving too much even for her, she raises her fan to a level with her lips and subsides with an irrepressible smile behind it, while poor little Chips murmurs—

‘Oh, come, now. That is more than any fellow would believe, you know,’ and grins a pleased and radiant grin.

Bébé, being asked to sing, refuses, gently but firmly; and when I have delighted my audience with one or two old English ballads we give in and think with animation of our beds.

In the corridor above I seize hold of Bébé.

‘What has vexed you?’ I ask, anxiously. ‘Why are you not friends with me? You *must* come to my room before you go to bed. Promise.’

‘Very good. I will come,’ quietly disengaging my hand. Then, before closing the door: ‘Indeed, Phyllis, I think you might have told me,’ she says, in a tone of deep reproach.

So that is it! But surely she must have seen his coming so unexpectedly was a great surprise. And

is there a romance connected with her and Lord Chandos?

I confess to an overpowering feeling of curiosity. I dismiss my maid with more haste than usual, and, sitting in my dressing-gown and slippers, long for Bébé's coming. I am convinced I shall not sleep one wink if she fails to keep this appointment.

I am not doomed to a sleepless night, however, as presently she comes in—all her beautiful hair loose about her shoulders.

‘Now, Bébé,’ I exclaim, jumping up to give her a good shake, ‘how could you be so cross all about nothing? I did not know myself he was coming so soon. You made me miserable the entire evening, and spoiled everything.’

‘But you knew he was coming some time; why did you not say so?’

‘I forgot all about him. I knew no reason why I should attach importance to his presence here. I don't know now either. I was quite ignorant of your previous acquaintance with him. Probably, had he waited in London until next week, as he originally intended, it might have occurred to me to mention his coming, and so I would have spared myself all the cruelty and neglect and wicked looks so lavishly bestowed upon me this evening.’

‘You have yet to learn,’ says Miss Beatoun, who is, I think, a little ashamed of her pettishness, ‘that of all things I most detest being taken by surprise. It puts me out dreadfully; I don't recover myself for ever so long; and to see Lord Chandos here, of all people, when I believed him safe in Italy, took away my breath. Phyllis, I don't know how it is, but I feel I must tell you all about it.’

‘Yes, do. I am so anxious to hear. Yet I half-guess he is, or was, a lover of yours. Is it not so? And something has gone wrong?’

‘Very much wrong indeed,’ with a rather bitter

laugh. 'It will be a slight come-down to my pride to tell you this story; but I can trust you, can I not? I am not fond of women friends as a rule—indeed, Harriet is my only one—but you, Phyllis, have exercised upon me some charm, I do believe, as when I am near you I forget to be reserved.'

'That is because you know how well I like you.'

'Is it? Perhaps so. Well, about Lord Chandos. My story is a short one, you will say, and to the point. I met him first two years ago. He fell in love with me, and last year asked me to marry him. That is all; but you will understand by it how little ambitious I was of meeting him again.'

'And you——'

'Refused him, dear. How could I do otherwise? He was only Captain Everett then, without a prospect on earth; and I am no heiress. It would have meant poverty — scarcely even what is called "genteel poverty"—had I consented to be his wife; and—with a quick shudder of disgust—'I would rather be dead, I think, than endure such a life as that.'

'Did you love him, Bébé?'

'I liked him well enough to marry him, certainly,' she admits, slowly, 'had circumstances been different.'

We are silent for a little time; then Bébé says, in a low tone—

'He was so good about it, and I deserved so little mercy at his hands. I don't deny I had flirted with him horribly, with cruel heartlessness, considering I knew all along, when it came to the final move, I would say "No." I liked him so well that I could not make up my mind to be brave in time and let him go, never counting the pain I would afterwards have to inflict—and bear.'

Her voice sinks to a whisper. Without turning my head I lay my hand on hers.

'It all happened one morning,' she goes on, presently, making a faint pause between each sentence,

'quite early. There was nothing poetic or sentimental about it in the way of conservatories, or flowers, or music. He had come to pay me his usual visit. It was July, and mamma and I were leaving town the next day. We were not to see each other again for a long time. Perhaps that hastened it. It was a wet day, I remember—I can hear the sad drip, drip of the raindrops now—and we felt silent and depressed. Somehow then—I hardly know how—it all was said—and over.'

'How sad it was' I murmur, stroking the hand I hold with quiet sympathy. 'And then——'

'Then I let him see how utterly false and worthless was the woman he loved. I let him know that even if I adored him, his want of money would be an insurmountable barrier between us. I think I *told* him so. I am not quite sure of that. I do not recollect distinctly one word I said that day. I only know that he went away impressed with the belief that I was a mere contemptible money-worshipper.'

'Did he say anything—reproachful, I mean?'

'That was the hardest part of it. He would not reproach me. Had he been bitter, or hard, or cold, I could have borne it better; but he was silent on the head of his wrongs. He only sat there, looking distinctly miserable, without an unkind word on his lips.'

'What? Did he say nothing?'

'Very little. Unless to tell me I had treated him disgracefully. I don't know that there was anything *to be* said. He declared that he had expected just such an answer; that he felt he had no right to hope for a happier one. He did not blame me—of course I was acting wisely—and so on. He never once asked me to reconsider my words. Then he got up and said he must bid me a long farewell. He knew a man who would gladly exchange with him and give him a chance of seeing a little Indian life—he was tired of England. You can imagine the kind of thing.'

‘Poor fellow! How did he look?’

‘He was very white, and his lips were slightly compressed. And I think there were—*tears* in his eyes. Oh, Phyllis!’ cries Bébé, passionately, rising to push her chair back sharply, and beginning to pace the room, ‘when I saw the tears in his eyes I almost gave in. *Almost*, mark you—not quite. I am too well-trained for that.’

‘I think I would have relented.’

‘I am sure you would; but your education has been so different. Upon this earth,’ says Bébé, slowly, ‘there is nothing so mean or so despicable as a woman born and bred as I am. Taught from our cradles to look on money and money’s worth as the principal good to be obtained in life; with the watchwords, “an excellent match,” “a rich marriage,” “an eligible *parti*,” drummed into our ears from the time we put on sashes and short frocks. There is something desperately unwholesome about the whole thing.’

‘Did you never see him since?’ ask I, deeply impressed by her manner and the love-affair generally.

‘Never until to-night. You may fancy what a shock it was.’

‘And he didn’t even *kiss* you before going away, as he thought, for ever?’ I exclaim, unwisely.

‘Kiss me!’ severely. ‘How do you mean, Phyllis? Of course he did not kiss me—why should he?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. I suppose it would have been unusual,’ I return, overwhelmed with confusion. ‘Only it seemed to me—I mean it is so *good* to be kissed by one we love.’

‘Is it?’ coldly. ‘I am not fond of kissing.’

I hasten to change the subject. ‘When he was gone how wretched you must have felt!’

‘I suppose I did. But I shed no tears: I was too unhappy, I think, for mere crying. However’—with sudden recklessness,—‘it is all over now, and we have lived through it. Let us forget it. A month after the



scene I have just described the old lord and his sons were drowned, and Travers Everett came in for everything. You see what I lost by being mercenary.'

'I wonder, when he became so rich, he did not come back directly and ask you all over again.'

'He knew rather better than that, I take it,' says Bébé, with a slight accession of *hauteur*; and for the second time I feel ashamed of myself and my ignoble sentiments. 'He went abroad, and stayed there until now. He don't look as though he had pined overmuch, does he?' with a laugh. 'A broken heart is the most curable thing I know. I thought I had never seen him look so well.'

'A man cannot pine for ever,' I say in defence of the absent. Then, rather nervously: 'I wonder when you will marry now, Bébé?'

'Never, most probably,' kneeling down on the hearthrug. 'You see I threw away my good luck. Fortune will scarcely be so complaisant a second time,' says Bébé, with a gay laugh, laying her head down upon my lap; and then in another moment I become aware that she is sobbing passionately.

The tears rise thickly to my own eyes, yet I find no words to comfort her. I keep silence, and suffer my fingers to wander caressingly through her dark tresses as they lie scattered across my knees. Perhaps the greatest eloquence would not have been so acceptable as that silent touch.

In a very short time the storm passes, and Bébé, raising her face, covers it with her hands.

'I have *not* been crying,' she says, with wilful vehemence; 'you must not think I have. If you do I will never be your friend again. How dare you say I shed tears for any man?'

'I did not say it, Bébé. I will never say it,' I return, earnestly.

She puts her bare arms round my neck and lays her head upon my shoulder in such a position that I cannot

see her face, and so remains, staring thoughtfully into the fire.

‘I know you will be very angry with me,’ I say, presently, ‘but *I* must say it. Perhaps you will marry him some time.’

‘No, never, never. Do not think it. I refused him when he was poor; I would not accept him now he is rich. How could you ever imagine it? Even were he to ask me again (which, believe me, is the most unlikely thing that could happen), I would give him the same answer. He may think me heartless; he shall not think me so mean a thing as that.’

‘If he loves you he will think no bad of you.’

‘You do well to say “if.” I don’t suppose he does love me now. He did once.’ Her arms tighten round me, although I think for the moment she has forgotten me and everything, and is looking back upon the past. After a little while she says again, ‘Yes, he did love me once.’

‘And does still. I am sure of it. His whole face changed when he saw you this evening. I remarked it, though I am not generally famous for keen observation. It is impossible he can have forgotten you, Bébé.’

‘Of course. There are so few pretty people in the world,’ with a smile. ‘The change you saw in him to-night, Phyllis, was probably surprise, or perhaps disgust, at finding himself so unexpectedly thrown again into my society. He did not once address me during the evening.’

‘How could he, when you devoted yourself in such a provokingly open manner to that ridiculous boy, and afterwards allowed Captain Jenkins to monopolise you exclusively? I wish, Bébé, you would not.’

Indeed I shall,’ says Miss Beatoun, petulantly. ‘I shall flirt as hard as ever I can with everyone I meet. He shall not think I am dying of chagrin and disappointment.’

‘And will you not even speak to Lord Chandos?’

‘Not if I can help it. So you need not say another word. If you do I will report you to Marmaduke as a dangerous little match-maker, and perhaps marry Captain Jenkins. I have really met more disagreeable men. And as for Chips,’ says Bébé, who has seemingly recovered all her wonted gaiety, ‘that boy is the most amusing thing I know. He is perfectly adorable. And so handsome as he is too! It is quite a pleasure alone to sit and look at him.’

‘Are you going away now?’ seeing her rise.

‘Yes; it is all hours, or rather small hours, and Marmaduke will be here in a moment to scold me for keeping you from your beauty-sleep. Good night, dearest, and forget what a goose I made of myself. Promise me.’

‘I cannot promise to forget what I never thought,’ I reply, giving her a good hug; and so we part for some hours.

Still I do not go to bed. Her story has affected me deeply, and sets me pondering. I have seen so little real *bonâ-fide* sentiment in my home-life that probably it interests me in a greater degree than it would most girls of my own age differently reared. I sit before my fire, my hands clasped around my knees, for half an hour, cogitating as to ways and means of reuniting my friend to her beloved—for that Lord Chandos has ceased to regard her with feelings of ardent affection is a thing I neither can nor will believe.

I am still vaguely planning, when Marmaduke, coming in, orders me off to my slumbers, declaring my roses will degenerate into lilies if I persist in keeping such dissipated hours.

## CHAPTER XXI.

'BILLY is coming to-day,' is the first thought that occurs to me as I spring from my bed on the morning of the 19th and run to the window. It is a glorious day outside, sunny and warm and bright, full of that air of subdued summer that always belongs to September. The flowers below are waving gently in the soft breeze; the trees have a musical rustle they surely lacked on yesterday; the very birds in the air and amongst the branches are crying, 'Coming, coming, coming!'

Soon I shall see him; soon I shall welcome him to my own home. Alas, alas! that so many hours must pass before he can enter my expectant arms! That detestable 'Bradshaw' has decreed that no train but the half-past five shall bring him.

Bébé, who is immensely amused at my impatience, declares herself prepared to fall in love with Billy on the spot—the very moment she sees him.

'I am passionately attached to boys,' she says, meeting me in the corridor about half-past three (I am in such a rambling unsettled condition as compels me to walk from pillar to post all day); 'I like their society—witness my devotion to Chips—and they like mine. But for all that I shall be nowhere with your Billy; you have another guest in your house who will take his heart by storm.'

'Whom do you mean?'

'Lady Blanche Going. I never yet saw the boy who could resist her. Is not that odd? Is she not the last person one would select as a favourite with youth?'

'I hope he will *not* like her,' I cry, impulsively—then, feeling myself, without cause, ungracious—'that is—of course I do not mean that—only—'

'Oh, yes, you do,' says Miss Beatoun, coolly; 'you

would be very sorry if Billy were to waste his affection on her—so would I. You detest her—so do I. Why mince matters? But for all that your boy will be her sworn slave, or I am much mistaken. If only to spite *you* she will make him her friend.’

‘But why? What have I ever done to her?’

‘Nothing; only it is intolerable that somebody should admire you so much.’ And with a mischievous glance Miss Beatoun disappears round the corner.

‘Marmaduke,’ say I, seizing my husband by the arm as the dog-cart comes round to the door for final orders, preparatory to starting for the station (it is now almost five o’clock), ‘is William going for Billy? I wish *I* could go. You don’t think he will expect——’ I hesitate.

Marmaduke reads my face attentively for a minute, then ponders a little.

‘You think he may be disappointed if welcomed only by a groom?’ he says, with a smile. ‘Take that little pucker off your forehead, Phyllis—I will bring your Billy to you myself.’ And, mounting the dog-cart, drives off to the station without another word.

As I have already said, it is now five o’clock. It will take him just half an hour to reach Carston and meet the train. Ten minutes at least must be wasted finding Billy, getting his traps together, and settling things generally; then half an hour more to drive home; so that altogether one hour and ten minutes must go by before I can hope to see them. This appears an interminable age; all the day has not seemed so long as this last hour and ten minutes.

At a quarter to six I run upstairs and get myself dressed for dinner—although we do not dine until half-past seven—hurrying through my toilette with the most exaggerated haste, as if fearing they may arrive before it is finished; and I would not miss being the first to greet my boy for all the world contains.

When I once more reach the drawing-room it still

wants five minutes to the promised time. Lady Blanche Going and one or two of the men are lounging here. She raises her head as I enter and scans me languidly.

‘Do we dine earlier than usual to-night, Mrs. Carington?’ she asks, with curiosity.

‘No; not earlier than usual. It was a mere whim of mine getting my dressing over so soon.’

‘Oh, I quite forgot your brother was coming,’ she says, with a faint smile, bending over her work again. She looks as though she were pitying my youthful enthusiasm. I make no reply. Taking up a book, I seat myself near a front window, as far as possible from the other occupants of the room, and pretend to read.

A quarter past six. Surely they ought to be here by this. Twenty-five minutes past six! I rise, regardless of comment, and gaze up the avenue.

Oh, if anything should have prevented his coming! Are not masters always tyrants? But even in such a case ought not Marmaduke be back by this to tell me of it?

Or, yet more sickening thought, *can* any accident have happened to the train, and is Marmaduke afraid to bring me home the evil tidings?

I am just picturing to myself Billy’s chestnut locks bedabbled with his gore when something smites upon mine ear. Surely it is the sound of wheels. I flatten my nose against the window-panes and strain my eyes into the gathering twilight.

Yes—fast as the good horse can bring them they come. A moment later and the dog-cart in full swing rounds the corner, while in it, coated to the chin, and in full possession of the reins, sits my brother, with Marmaduke—quite a secondary person—smiling beside him.

I utter an exclamation, and, flinging my book from me—blind to the smiles my guests cannot restrain—I

rush headlong from the room, and in another instant have Billy folded in my arms. Surely a year has gone by since last I saw him.

‘Oh, Billy, Billy!’ I cry, clinging to him, the tears in my eyes, while glad smiles fight for mastery upon my lips. ‘Is it really you? It seems years and years since last we were together. Oh, how tall you have grown, and how good-looking!’

‘Oh, I’m all right,’ returns Billy, graciously, giving back my kisses, warmly, it is true, but with none of the lingering tenderness that characterises mine. ‘I don’t think a fellow alters much in a month. Though really, now that I look at you, *you* appear very tall too, and thin, I think. We had such a jolly drive over; never wanted the whip the whole way, except for the flies.’

‘Yes. And are you glad to see me, Billy? Were you lonely without me? I was so lonely without you! But come upstairs to your room, and I will tell you everything.’

As I am drawing him eagerly away I catch sight of Marmaduke’s face, who has been silently regarding us all this time, himself unnoticed.

Something in his expression touches me with remorse. I run up to him and lay my hand upon his arm.

‘Thank you for bringing him,’ I say, earnestly, ‘and for letting him have the reins. I noticed that. You have made me very happy to-day.’

‘Have I? It was easily done. I am glad to know I have made you happy for even one short day.’

He smiles, but draws his arm gently from my grasp as he speaks, and I know by the line across his forehead some painful thought has jarred upon him.

I am feeling self-reproachful and sorry, when Billy’s voice recalls me to the joy of the present hour.

‘Are you coming?’ says that autocrat, impatiently, from the first step of the stairs, with about six bulging

brown-paper parcels in his arms, that evidently no human power could have induced to enter the portmanteau that stands beside him. 'Come,' he says again; and, forgetful of everything but the fact of his presence near me, I race him up the stairs and into the bedroom my own hands have made bright for him, while the elegant Thomas and the portmanteau follow more slowly in our rear.

'What a capital room!' says my Billy, 'and lots of space. I like that. I hate being cramped, as I always am at home.'

'I am glad you like it,' I reply, bubbling over with satisfaction. 'I settled it myself, and had the carpet taken off, because I knew you would prefer the room without it. But I desired them to put that narrow piece all round the bed, lest your feet should be cold. You won't object to that?'

'Oh, no; it may remain, if you have any fancy for it.'

I am about to suggest that as it is not intended for my bare feet it does not affect me one way or the other; but knowing argument with Billy to be worse than useless, I refrain.

'Have you any dress-clothes?' I ask presently, somewhat nervously.

'No; I never had any dress-clothes in my life—where would I get them?—but I have black breeches and a black jacket (like a shell-jacket, you know), and a white shirt and a black tie. That will do, won't it? Langley says I look uncommon well in them; and you'll see when I'm dressed up and that, I'll be as fit as the best of 'em.'

It is evident Billy's good opinion of himself has not been lowered since we parted. He holds a generous belief in his own personal attractions; so does Langley, whoever he may be.

'Far nicer than any of them,' I respond, with enthusiasm; and he does not contradict me.



When the garments just described have been laid upon the bed, and Billy discloses symptoms of a desire to get into them, I turn to leave the room. But on the threshold I bethink me of another important question, and pause to ask it in a tone not altogether free from trepidation; for Billy, at times, is a person difficult to deal with.

‘Have you a clean white cambric handkerchief?’ I ask, slowly.

‘Well, no, I have not,’ confesses my brother, amiably. ‘You see all the white ones mother gave me when leaving I exchanged with another fellow for some of his. And grand handkerchiefs they are—really handsome ones, you know, Phyllis; but they have all got flags or sailors or fat Shahs painted in the corners, and in the middle, which makes them look just a *leetle* conspicuous. But it won’t matter a bit,’ says Billy, cheerfully, ‘as I seldom blow my nose (indeed, never, unless I have a cold in my head); and if I don’t exhibit the Shahs they will never find me out.’

‘Oh, indeed, that would not do,’ I exclaim, earnestly. ‘You must let me get you one of Marmaduke’s, and then you will feel more easy in your mind. Just suppose you were to sneeze! I often do it, even without having a cold.’

‘All right—you can bring it,’ says Billy, and I withdraw.

When, half an hour later, the drawing-room door opens to admit him, and looking up I see my brother’s well-shaped head and slight boyish figure, a strange pang of delight and admiration touches my heart.

He enters boldly, with all the grace and independence an English boy—and specially an Eton boy, if well-bred—possesses, and, advancing leisurely, comes to a standstill by my side.

I introduce him to Harriet, who is nearest to me; then to Sir George Ashurst, then to Captain Jenkins; afterwards I leave him to his own devices. I am glad

to hear him chatting away merrily to kind Sir George, when a voice, addressing him from an opposite sofa, makes me turn.

The voice belongs to Lady Blanche Going, and she is smiling at him in her laziest, most seductive manner.

‘Won’t you come and speak to me?’ she says, sweetly. ‘Mrs. Carrington will not find time to present you to everyone, and I cannot wait for a formal introduction. Come here, and let me tell you I like Etonians better than anything else in the world.’

Sir Mark’s moustache moves slightly, just sufficient to allow his lips to form themselves into a faint sneer; while Billy, thus summoned, crosses over and falls into the seat beside her ladyship.

‘Do you really?’ he says. ‘But I’m awfully afraid I shall destroy your good opinion of us. You see the fact is’—he goes on, candidly—‘I have so little to say for myself I fear in a very few minutes you will vote me a bore. However, you are quite welcome to anything I have to say; and when you are tired of me please say so.’

‘Oh, that your elders had but half your wit!’ exclaims her ladyship, with an affected but bewitching shake of her beautiful head. ‘If they would but come to the point as you do, Mr. Vernon, what a great deal of time might be saved!’

‘Oh, I say, don’t call me that,’ says my brother, with an irresistible laugh; ‘everyone calls me “Billy.” I shouldn’t know myself by any other name. If you insist upon calling me Mr. Vernon I shall fancy you have found reason to dislike me.’

‘And would that be an overwhelming calamity?’

‘I should certainly regard it in that light. I like being friends with—beautiful people,’ returns Billy, with a faint hesitation but all a boy’s flattering warmth; and so on.

Here Sir James Handcock, wakening from one of his usual fits of somnolence, actually takes the trouble

to cross the room and put a question to his wife in an audible whisper.

‘Who is that handsome lad?’ he asks, staring kindly at Billy. (He was absent when my brother first entered the room.)

‘Mrs. Carrington’s brother,’ returns his wife, with a sympathetic smile.

‘A really charming face,’ says Sir James, criticisingly; ‘scarcely a fault. Quite a face for an artist’s pencil.’ And I feel my heart warm towards Sir James Handcock.

When dinner is announced Lady Blanche declares her intention of going down with no one but her new friend; and Billy, proud and enchanted, conducts her to the dining-room; while Béb  casts a ‘what-did-I-tell-you?’ sort of look at me behind their backs. Indeed, so thorough are the fascinations she exercises upon him that before the evening is concluded he is hopelessly and entirely her slave.

## CHAPTER XXII.

It has come at last—the night of my first ball; and surely no girlish *d butante* in her first season ever felt a greater thrill of delight at this mere fact than I, spite of my being ‘wooded an’ married an’ a’.

Behold me in my room arrayed for conquest.

Having once made up my mind to the black velvet—though mother, and Harriet, and B    all declare me a great deal too young and too slight for it—I persist in my determination, and the dress is ordered and sent down.

It is a most delectable dress, rejoicing greatly in ‘old point;’ and when I am in it, and Martha has fastened the diamonds in my hair and ears and round my throat and wrists and waist, I contemplate myself in a lengthy mirror with feelings akin to admiration

Having dismissed my maid, who professes herself lost in pleased astonishment at the radiant spectacle I present, I go softly to 'Duke's dressing-room door; and, hearing him whistling within, open it quietly.

Standing motionless, framed in by the portals, I murmur, 'Marmaduke.'

He turns, and for a moment regards me silently.

'My darling!' he says then, in a tone of glad surprise, and comes quickly up to me.

'Am I—looking—well?' I ask, tremulously.

'“Well!” you are looking lovely,' returns he, with enthusiasm; and, taking my hand carefully, as though fearful of doing some injury to my toilette, leads me before his glass. 'See there,' he says, 'what a perfect little picture you make.'

I stare myself out of countenance, and am thoroughly satisfied with what I see.

'I had no idea I could ever appear so—presentable,' I say, half-shy, wholly delighted.

'You shall be painted in that dress,' declares 'Duke, warmly, 'and put all those antiquated dames in the picture gallery in the shade.'

'Are not the diamonds beautiful?' exclaim I. 'And my gloves such a good fit! And'—anxiously—'Marmaduke, are you *sure* you like my hair?'

'I like everything about you. I never saw you look half so well. I feel horribly proud of you.'

'Bestow a little of your admiration on my bouquet, if you please. Sir Mark had it sent down to me, all the way from London, and his man brought it to me half an hour ago. Was it not thoughtful?'

'Very. I suppose'—with a comical sigh—'all the men will be making love to you to-night. That's the worst of having a pretty wife—she is only half one's own.' Then, abruptly changing the subject: 'What dear little round babyish arms!' stooping to press his lips to each in turn. 'They might belong to a mere child.'

‘And you really think I am looking *downright pretty*?’ I ask, desperately, yet withal very wistfully, reading his face for a reply. I do so ardently long to be classed amongst the well-favoured people!

‘I should rather think I do. Why, Phyllis! of what earthly use is a mirror to you?’

‘As—as pretty as Dora?’ with hesitation. I am gradually nearing the highest point.

‘Pshaw! Dora, indeed! She could not hold a candle to you—to be emphatic.’

‘Well, here’s a kiss for you,’ say I, standing on tiptoe to deliver it in the exuberance of my satisfaction; feeling for once in my life utterly and disgracefully conceited.

Marmaduke, however, appearing at this moment dangerously desirous of taking me into his arms and giving me a hearty embrace, to the detriment of my dignity, I beat a hasty retreat, and go off to exhibit myself to mamma and Dora.

His Grace the Duke of Chillington and Lady Alicia Slate-Gore have arrived. The rooms begin to look gay and very full. His Grace—a well-preserved gentleman, of unknown age—adjusts his glass more carefully in his right eye, and, coming over, requests from me the pleasure of the first quadrille. I accept, and begin to regard myself as an important personage. I am about to stand up with a real, undeniable duke. I glance at myself in one of the long mirrors that line the walls, and seeing therein a slender figure, robed in velvet, and literally flashing with diamonds, I appear good in my own eyes, and feel a self-satisfied smirk stealing over my countenance.

I am dimly conscious that darling mother is sitting on a sofa, somewhat distant from me, looking as pretty as possible, and absolutely flushed with pride and pleasure as she beholds me and my illustrious partner.

Dora, a little farther down, is positively delicious in white silk and pink coral—the coral being mine. Her still entertaining for me the old grudge does not prevent her borrowing of me freely such things as she deems may suit her child-like beauty; while I, unable to divest myself of the idea that in some way I have wronged her, and that but for me all these things she borrows would by right be hers, lend to her lavishly from all that I possess.

To-night, however, in spite of the bewitching simplicity of her appearance, I feel no jealous pangs. ‘For this night only’ I will consider myself as charming as Dora.

‘Rather think it will be a severe season. You hunt?’ asks his Grace, in rather high jerky tones, having come to the conclusion, I presume, that he ought to say something.

I answer him to the intent that I do not. That, in fact—lowering to my pride as it may be to confess it—I would rather be afraid to do so.

He regards me with much interest and approval.

‘Quite right—quite right,’ he says. ‘Ladies are—ha—charming, you know, of course, and that—but in a hunting field—a mistake.’

I laugh, and suggest amiably he is not over-gallant.

‘No—no? really! Have I said anything rude? Can’t apply to you, you know, Mrs. Carrington, as you say you have no ambition to be in at the death. Women, as a rule, never *are*, you know—they are generally in a drain by that time; and if a man sees them, unless he wants to be considered a brute for life, he must stop and pull ’em out. It takes nice feelings to do that gracefully, and with a due regard to proper language, in the middle of a good run. Charming girl, Miss Beatoun.’

‘Very.’

‘Pretty girl, too, in white silk and the coral.’

‘You mean my sister?’

‘Indeed—indeed! You must excuse the openness of my observations. I would never have guessed at the relationship. Can’t discern the slightest family resemblance.’

He says this so emphatically that I understand him to mean he considers me far inferior to Dora. I begin to think his Grace an obtuse and undesirable person, sadly wanting in discrimination. No doubt he is thinking my plainness only to be equalled by my dullness. I wish impatiently the quadrille would begin and get itself over, that I may be rid of him, more especially as I am longing with a keenness that belongs alone to youth for a waltz or a galop, or anything fast and inspiriting.

At last the band strikes up and we take our places. Marmaduke (who is dancing with Lady Alicia Slate-Gore) and I are the only untitled people in the set. Nevertheless, as I look at my husband I think to myself, with a certain satisfaction, that not one amongst us has an appearance so handsome or so distinguished as his.

The quadrille being at an end, Sir Mark Gore instantly claims me for the coming waltz, and as I place my hand very willingly upon his arm whispers—

‘You are like an old picture. I cannot take my eyes off you. Who told you to dress yourself like that!’

‘Myself. Is it not nice?’ I ask, eagerly, casting another surreptitious glance at my youthful form as we move near a glass. ‘Don’t you think it becoming?’

‘If I told you all I thought,’ he exclaims, eagerly—then, checking himself with an effort, and a rather forced laugh, continues—‘you might perhaps read me a lecture.’

‘Not I—I am not in the mood for lectures. I feel half-intoxicated with excitement and pleasure, as though nothing could have power to annoy or vex me to-night. The very music thrills me.’

You remind me of Browning's little lady—

She was the smallest lady alive:  
Made in a piece of Nature's madness.  
*Too* small almost for the life and gladness  
That over-filled her.

You remember her?’

‘Am *I* the “smallest lady alive?” Why, see, I am quite up to your shoulder. You insult me, sir. Come, dance—*dance*, or I will never forgive you.’

He passes his arm round my waist, and in another moment we are waltzing.

Did I ever dance before, I wonder? Or is this some new sensation? I hardly touch the ground; my heart—my very pulses—beat in unison with the perfect music.

I stop, breathless, flushed, radiant, and glance up at Sir Mark, with parted smiling lips, as though eager to hear him say how delightful he too has found it.

He is a little pale, I fancy, and answers my smile rather slowly.

‘Yes; it has been *more* than pleasant,’ he says, divining and answering my thought.

He is not enthusiastic—and I am dissatisfied.

‘You don’t *look*,’ I say with inquisitive reproach, ‘as though you enjoyed it one bit.’

A curious smile passes over Sir Mark’s face.

‘Don’t I?’ he replies quietly.

‘No. Decidedly the reverse even. Of *course*’—with a considerable amount of pique—‘you could have found plenty of better dancers amongst the people here.’

‘Perhaps I could—although you must permit me to doubt it. I only know I would rather have you for a partner than anyone else in the room.’

I am not proof against flattery. A smile is born and grows steadily round my lips, until at length my whole face beams.

‘Well, you might try to *appear* more contented,’



I say, with a last feeble attempt at remonstrance, 'When *I* get what I want I always look pleased.'

'I know you do. But I am a thankless being—the more I get the more I want. When a man is starving, to give him a *little* only adds to the pangs he suffers——'

The last bars of the waltz die out with a lingering wailing sigh. A little hush falls . . . . . Sir George Ashurst, coming up, offers me his arm.

'You will let me put my name down for another before you go?' asks Sir Mark, hurriedly, following us a few steps.

I hand him my card. 'Keep it for me,' I say, 'until after the dance. You can then return it.'

'May I have the next after this?' very eagerly.

I glance at him over my shoulder. 'Yes—if I am disengaged—and you care for it,' I make answer, forgetful of my character as hostess, of the world's tongue, of everything but the sweet gaiety of the present hour

The night wears on. Already is it one hour past midnight. Sir Mark is again my partner.

Up to this the evening has fully answered my fondest expectations. I have danced incessantly. I have been utterly, thoughtlessly happy. Now a slight contraction about the soles of my feet warns me I begin to experience fatigue.

Sir Mark leads me towards a conservatory, dimly lit and exquisitely arranged, at the door of which I stand to bestow a backward glance upon the ball-room.

At a considerable distance I can discern Bété standing beside Lord Chandos. It is without doubt an interval in their dance, but they are not talking. Miss Beatoun's head is slightly inclined *from* her companion, and it is evident to me she has mounted an exceedingly high horse. Nevertheless, to see her with

him at all gratifies me, as it is surely a step in the right direction.

Dora is waltzing with a 'Heavy,' and I can see Sir George glowering upon them from a remote corner. Dora sees him also, and instantly smiles tenderly into her dragoon's light-blue eyes. This too looks promising. My spirits go up another degree, and I indulge in a low pleased laugh.

'Still revelling in bliss, Mrs. Carrington?' Sir Mark's voice recalls me. 'No flaw as yet?'

'Not one. Of course not. What a ridiculous question! I told you nothing should interfere with my enjoyment this evening. Yet, stay'—with a demure and dejected shake of the head—'every now and then I *am* troubled with a faint regret.'

'And it—is——'

'That all this must some time come to an end. There! is not that a haunting thought?'

I laugh—so does he.

'I shall have plenty of it in the spring,' I continue presently. 'Duke says I shall go to London then.'

'And so lose the keen sense of pleasure you now possess. What a mistake! Take my advice, and don't go through a London season.'

'What stupid advice! Indeed I *shall*, and enjoy it too. I am only longing for the time to come round. I shall be dreaming of it from now until then.'

'You are bent on rushing wildly to your fate,' says he, smiling. 'Well, do so, and rue it later on. When you come to look on dancing, not as a good thing in itself, but merely as a means to an end, remember I warned you.'

'I will remember nothing,' I say, saucily, 'except that I am at this moment without a care in the world. Come, let us go in.'

Sir Mark hesitates.

'Shall we finish the dance first?'

'No.' I am looking longingly into the cool green

light of the conservatory beyond me. 'See how delicious it is in there. Let us find a seat.'

Still he hesitates, as though unwilling to move in the desired direction.

'It seems a pity to lose this music,' he says. 'Afterwards we could rest.'

I turn my eyes mischievously upon him.

'Who is keen about dancing now?' I ask, gaily. 'Not I. For my part I pine for a sofa. As you *will* have it, I confess I am just a little wee bit tired.'

We walk on through the outer nest of flowers into the smaller one beyond, which is if anything dimlier lit, calmer, more subtly perfumed. The nameless fragrance is everywhere; the splash, splash of a small fountain falls soothingly on the ear; the music, though distinct, is strangely, dreamily distant.

Some tall shrubs are dispersed here and there; behind them cosy seats are hidden; shadows of a darker shade envelope them.

As with purposeless steps I pass by a rather larger one of these I suddenly find myself face to face with Lady Blanche Going and—Marmaduke.

Now, there is no earthly reason why they should not be here alone together; hundreds of other couples, tired and warm from dancing, have probably done the same; yet as my eyes fall upon them a strange feeling, that is partly anger, partly pain, troubles me. All my gay wild spirits sink and disappear; I know my face has lost its vivacity and expresses only surprise and chagrin.

As my glance fastens more directly upon 'Duke I see he too is looking unlike himself. There is a dark almost fierce expression in his eyes—his lips are compressed. A slight movement of the thin nostrils as he draws his breath tells me he is evidently suppressing some strong emotion.

Her ladyship, exquisitely lovely in deep cream-coloured silk, with something scarlet in her dark hair,

is nestling amongst the crimson cushions of the lounge, and does not deign to raise herself as we approach. Her eyes are a degree larger, more languid than usual; her complexion, always good, is perfect in this soft light. Her fan is in my husband's hands.

It is impossible for me, without being guilty of positive rudeness, to turn and leave them without a word. I stand, therefore, silent—a pale, slight child, next to her, in all her supercilious beauty—with little of the woman about me, except my trailing velvet and golden ring and glittering gleaming jewels.

‘Are you having a good time, Mrs. Carrington?’ asks Lady Blanche, sweetly.

‘Very, thank you,’ with extreme coldness. ‘I had no idea I could enjoy anything so much.’

‘You *look* happy,’ with increased amiability and a soft indulgent smile, such as one would use towards an excitable child. ‘I suppose you still find pleasure in dancing?’

‘Yes. I believe I have a good many years yet to run before I must, for decency's sake, declare myself tired of it.’

‘Until you are quite an old married woman like me? Yes,’ with much complacency. ‘You are fortunate in your partner. All the world acknowledges Sir Mark to be above praise—in the dancing line. Even *I*’—with a sudden and to *me* utterly inexplicable glance at the gentleman in question—‘can remember how desirable he used to be.’

Dead silence, and a slight bow on the part of Sir Mark.

‘Indeed!’ say I, turning a smile of exaggerated friendliness upon him. ‘Then consider how doubly good it is of him to waste *so much* of his time upon a mere novice like me.’

I hardly know what prompts this speech. Perhaps a faint remembrance of how at certain times, when conversing with Mark Gore, I have looked across the

room or gardens, or wherever we might chance to be, and seen a glance that was almost hatred fall on me from her ladyship's eyes. Now, however, my spiteful little speech has no greater effect than to cause Marmaduke's fingers to close with vicious force around the painted satin toy he holds.

Why does he not speak? Why will he not even suffer his gaze to meet mine? I feel angry and reckless. He is sitting a little forward, with his head slightly bent and a determined expression upon his face. Is he anxious for my departure? Have I disturbed his interesting *tête-à-tête*?

I will show him how little power he has over me for either joy or sorrow.

I turn away, and, with a backward careless nod at Lady Blanche, say lightly—

‘Take care you don't suffer for sitting there. There are so *many* draughts in a conservatory. We even consider the open air safer.’

And with that, though it was by no means my original intention, I go out through the glass door into the silent starlit night, and even manage to laugh gaily before we are beyond earshot.

As we touch the gravel, however, I face Sir Mark; and, foolishly unmindful of how my words may impress him, cry fiercely, ‘Did you bring me there on purpose?’

‘*Where?*’ he asks, with such wide astonishment as instantly brings me to my senses. I feel overpowered with shame, and try to turn it off, clumsily enough.

‘Into Lady Blanche's presence,’ I say, fretfully. ‘You *know* that woman always puts me out.’

‘Was it not yourself who *insisted* on going there?’ Sir Mark reminds me, gravely.

‘True,’ I reply; and then I laugh a little, and taking higher ground, continue: ‘You are horrified at my ill-temper, are you not? And, indeed, I have behaved disgracefully. After all, I don't know why I

should feel bitterly towards her ; it is a mere unfounded prejudice on my part. You think me wretchedly pettish ?’

‘I do not, indeed,’ very quietly. ‘Of course I can fully understand how utterly impossible it would be for you and Blanche Going to have a single idea in common.

‘She is so clever, you mean,’ with a small frown.

‘She is such an *intrigante*, I mean,’ replies my companion, quite coolly.

‘Let us go in—it is cold,’ I say, with a quick shiver. So we go round by the hall-door, and soon again find ourselves in the ball-room. As we enter I determinedly put from me all thought of ‘Duke’s dark passionate face. I *will* be happy. I *will* wrench from the flying hours all they have worth taking. Why should I care, who never really loved, whether or not he finds contentment in another woman’s society ?

‘I am tired, and somewhat dispirited. The rooms are growing thinner. A voice at my side makes me start and turn.

‘If not engaged, will you give me this?’ asks ‘Duke, ceremoniously.

‘Certainly—if you *wish* it. But are you so *badly* off for a partner ? To dance with one’s wife must be—to say the least of it—insipid.’

He makes no reply, but places his arm around my waist in silence. It is a waltz.

‘Do you know this is the first time I ever danced with you?’ I say, struck myself by the oddness of the idea.

‘I know.’ And in another moment we are keeping time to one of the dreamiest airs of Strauss. No, not even Mark Gore is a better dancer than Marmaduke.

When we have taken just one bare turn round the room ‘Duke stops short and leads me on to a balcony that by some chance is vacant.

‘There; I won’t inflict myself upon you any longer,’ he says quietly. ‘You dance very well. After all, practice has nothing to do with it. Will you sit down? Or shall I find you a partner for the remainder of this waltz?’

‘Are you in such a hurry to be gone?’

‘No; certainly not,’ seating himself beside *me*.

Silence.

‘I really wish, Marmaduke,’ I burst out, petulantly, ‘you would say what has aggrieved you, instead of sitting there frowning and glowering at one and making people feel uncomfortable. If you want to scold me do so. I daresay I shall survive it.’

This piece of impertinence rouses no wrath in the person addressed and draws no reply.

‘Well, what is it?’ I go on. ‘I have been *quite* happy all the evening—until now. Everyone else has been civil to me. If you *must* be disagreeable, be so at once. What have I done?’

‘I have accused you of nothing, Phyllis.’

‘No’—in an aggravating tone—‘I wish you would. I might then know why you are looking so cross.’

‘Of course I am quite aware you can be supremely happy without me. There was no necessity for you to hint at it so broadly.’

‘And you *cannot* without *me*, I suppose? You appeared very comfortable in the conservatory some time ago.’

‘Did I?’ with a quick return of the angry expression he had then worn. ‘My face belied me, then. I could hardly feel comfortable when I saw you laying yourself open to the ill-natured comments of the entire room.’

‘What do you mean, Marmaduke?’

‘You know what I mean. Is it the correct thing to dance the whole evening with one man?’

‘What man?’

‘Gore, of course. Everyone remarked it. I wish you would try to be a little more dignified, and remem-

ber how censorious is the world in which we are living.'

'Do you want me to understand that *you* think I was *flirting* with Sir Mark Gore?' I am literally trembling with indignation.

'No, I merely wish you to see how foolishly you have acted.'

'Was it with such base insinuations against your wife Lady Blanche amused you to-night? Do you think it was becoming conduct on your part to listen to such lies being uttered without rebuke?'

I have risen, and, with folded hands and white lips, am looking down upon him.

'Phyllis! How can you suppose that I would listen calmly to *anyone* who could speak evilly of *you*?'

'I can readily suppose anything after what you have said. Is it not worse of *you* to *think* evilly of me? *Flirting!* You beyond all people are in a position to acquit me of that. I had plenty of opportunities—did I ever flirt with you?'

'You did not indeed. I tell you I don't for a moment suspect you of such a thing; only——'

Here, looking up, we both become aware of Sir Mark's approach. He is still some distance from us.

'Are you engaged to him for this, Phyllis?' asks my husband, in a low hurried tone.

'Yes.'

'Don't dance it then,' imploringly. 'Say you will not, if only to oblige me.'

'Why? What excuse can I offer? You ask me to be rude to him, and yet give no reason why I should be so.'

'You intend dancing it with him, then?' sternly.

'Certainly,' in a freezing tone.

'Very good. Do so.' And, turning on his heel, he walks quietly and slowly away.

'I fear I have displaced a better man,' says Sir Mark, lightly, as he joins me. 'Will you forgive me? I



could not resist reminding you of your promise for this.'

'I fear I must undo that promise,' I return, gaily. 'I am really fatigued. To dance with me now would be no advantage to anyone.'

'Am I to thank Carrington for this disappointment? Was he fearful of your being over-tired?' He is courteous as ever, yet it seems to me the very faintest suspicion of a sneer comes to his lips—so faint that a moment later I doubt it has ever been.

'No,' I return, calmly. 'You give him credit for too much thoughtfulness. So far from dreaming of fatigue, he even asked me just now to dance with him—was not that self-denying of him?—but I only took one small turn. You forget I am not yet in proper training. I have had very little practice in my time.'

'Let me get you an ice. No? Some champagne, then? Iced water?'

'Nothing—thank you.'

'At least let me stay and talk to you.'

'I shall be glad of that. You never met anyone with such a rooted objection to her own society as I have,' I answer, laughing.

Then the strain loosens—the smile dies off my lips. How ardently do I long to be alone! Why does not this man get up and leave me? At all events Marmaduke will see I have repented of my ill-temper, and am not dancing.

As I sit moodily staring through the window at the gay scene within it so happens the Duke of Chillington, with one or two other men, passes slowly by.

'Our cousin of Chillington,' says Sir Mark, with an amused air—he is a second cousin of his grace—'has expressed himself enraptured with his hostess.'

I raise my eyebrows and betray some slight surprise.

'I think you must mistake. When speaking to him, in the early part of the evening, he gave me to understand—politely, it is true, but none the less plainly

—that he considered me a very mediocre sort of person.'

'In that case I fear we must believe his lordship to be an arch old hypocrite, as he told *me* he thought your manner and expression above all praise.'

'Well, I think him a very stupid old gentleman,' I reply, ungraciously.

Sir Mark turns his eyes upon me thoughtfully.

'Have you found that "little rift" after all, Mrs. Carrington?' asks he, gravely.

'Yes—I suppose so,' with impatience. Really the man grows very tiresome. 'I must have been mad to hope we wretched mortals could have five whole hours of unbroken happiness.'

'True—

Every white must have its blacke,  
And every sweete its soure.'

'Another quotation?' superciliously. I am not in an amiable mood. 'You seem to have them ready for all emergencies. How closely you must attend to your poetical studies! How fond of them you must be!'

'I am. Does that surprise you? Do you find a difficulty in associating me with polite verse?'

He has his elbow on his knee; his fingers caress his heavy black moustache. He is regarding me with the profoundest interest.

'I really never thought about it,' I return, wearily, with a rather petulant movement of the head.

Oh, that this hateful ball was at an end!

The last guest has departed. We of the household have gone up to our rooms. Now that it is all over I feel strangely inclined to sit down and have a good cry. In the solitude of my own room Marmaduke's words and glances come back to me, making me miserable, now that excitement is no longer at hand to help me to forget. One by one they return with cruel clearness.

If he would only come up from that horrid smoking-

room and be good-natured once more and make friends with me ! I think I could forgive and forget everything, and look upon the remembrance of this ball with much delight and satisfaction.

My slight jealousy of Blanche Going has disappeared and weighs not at all in the scale with my other miseries. Indeed, I have almost forgotten the incident in which she figured.

Hark ! a distant door bangs. Now surely he is coming. Will he enter my room first, I wonder, to speak to me, as he always does ? Or will he at once shut himself morosely into his dressing-room ?

Steps upon the stairs—steps along the corridor. A laugh.

‘Good night,’ from Sir Mark Gore. ‘Good night,’ heartily returned by Marmaduke. Bah ! how needlessly I have worried myself ! He is not angry at all. If he can jest and talk so easily with the cause of all our dispute, he can certainly entertain no bitter thoughts towards me.

I hear Marmaduke cross the inside room and approach mine. I feel confident he is coming to ‘make it up’ with me. I turn my chair, so as to face the door and be ready to meet him half-way in the reconciliation ; though—lest he may think me too eager—I find it my duty to let a gently aggrieved shadow fall upon my face.

The door opens, and he comes in, walks deliberately to my dressing-table, lights a candle, and then, without so much as a glance at the fireplace, where I sit, prepares to return to his own room.

‘Marmaduke !’ I cry, in dismay, springing to my feet.

He stops and regards me coldly.

‘Do you want me ? Can I do anything for you ?’

‘Duke ! how can you be so unkind, so unforgiving, so—so cruel to me ?’ I exclaim, going a little nearer, a suspicion of tears in my voice, large visible drops in

my eyes. 'Are you going away without saying one word to me?'

'What *have* I to say? You have left me nothing. When last we spoke I asked you to do a very simple thing to please me, and you refused.'

'I know. But afterwards I was sorry. I—you must have seen—I did not mean to vex you.'

'I saw nothing. The knowledge of what I *was* to see in defiance of my entreaty was not reassuring. I left the ball-room then, and did not return to it again. I was glad there was no necessity why I should do so—they were all going.'

'Then you do not know—I did not dance with Sir Mark—after all?' I ask, eagerly, laying the bare tips of my fingers upon his arm.

'No!' laying down the candle, while his colour grows a shade deeper. 'Did you refuse him, then?'

'Yes; I said I was too tired; I said——'

'Oh! Phyllis! darling—darling!' cries 'Duke, catching me in his arms before I can finish my confession and straining me to his heart.

'So you see you need not have been so very cold to me,' I whisper from this safe retreat, feeling much relieved. It is positive torture to me to quarrel with anyone.

'Forgive me, my own. It is our first disagreement—it shall be our last. What a miserable hour and a half I might have spared myself had I but known!'

'But, Duke, you said I behaved foolishly all the evening.'

'Never mind what I said.'

'But I must know who put it into your head. Was it Blanche Going?'

'She said something about it, certainly. It was a mere careless remark she made, but it struck me. I don't believe she knew she said it.'

'I guessed rightly, then. That woman hates me. She was trying to make mischief between you and me.'

‘Oh, no, darling. Do not misjudge her. I am convinced she had no hidden meaning in what she said. It was only a passing word, and probably I took it up wrongly. She has no thought for you but kindness.’

‘Then I don’t like her kindness, and I will not have you listening to her remarks about me. She never says anything without a meaning. You do not think I was flirting, ‘Duke?’

‘My darling, of course not. No; but I love you so dearly it is positive agony to imagine anyone *might*, by chance, misinterpret your conduct.’

‘And you will never be cross to me again?’

‘Never.’

‘And you are deeply grieved you behaved so infamously to me?’

‘I am, indeed.’

‘And I looked lovely all the evening?’

‘I never beheld anything half so lovely.’

‘And I dance very nicely?’

‘Beautifully. Quite like a fairy.’ Whereupon we both laugh merrily, and anger and resentment are forgotten.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

WE are all more or less late for breakfast next morning, Mr. Thornton being the only one who exhibits much symptoms of life. He is if possible a degree gayer, more sprightly than usual, and talks incessantly to anyone who will be kind enough to listen to him.

‘I do think a ball in a country house the most using-up thing I know,’ he says, helping himself generously to cold game-pie. ‘It is twice the fun of a town affair, but it knocks one up—no doubt of it—makes a fellow feel so seedy and languid, and ruins the appetite.’

‘I think you will do uncommonly well if you finish what you have there,’ remarks Sir Mark, languidly.

Thornton roars—so does Billy.

‘You have me there,’ says Chips. ‘I ought to have known better than to introduce *that* subject. My appetite is my weak point.’

‘Your strong point, I suppose you mean,’ puts in Sir Mark, faintly amused.

‘I think the worst thing about a country ball is this,’ says Bébé: ‘one feels so lonely, so purposeless when it is over. In town one will probably be going to another next evening—*here* one can do nothing but regret past glories. I wish it were all going to happen over again to-night.’

‘So do I,’ says Thornton, casting a sentimental glance at the speaker. ‘I would go over every hour of it again gladly—old maids and all—for the sake of the few minutes of real happiness I enjoyed. There are *some* people one could dance with *for ever*.’

Lord Chandos, raising his head, bestows a haughty stare upon the youthful Chips, which is quite thrown away, as that gay young Don is staring in turn, with all his might and with the liveliest admiration, at Miss Beatoun.

‘Could you?’ asks that fascinating person, innocently. ‘Now, I could not; at least I think I would like to sit down now and then. But, Phyllis, dear, seriously, I wish we were going to do something out of the common this evening.’

‘Try charades or tableaux,’ suggests Marmaduke, brilliantly.

‘The very thing! Tableaux let it be by all means. Marmaduke, no one can say last night’s dissipation has clouded your intellect. We will have them in the library, where the folding-doors will come in capitally.’

‘You used to be a great man at tableaux, Carrington,’ says Sir George; ‘and I shall never forget seeing Lady Blanche once as Guinevere.’

Her ladyship raises her white lids and smiles faintly.

'You were Lancelot, Gore, on that occasion,' continues this well-meaning, but blundering young man. 'You remember, eh?'

'Distinctly—quite as if it happened yesterday,' replies Sir Mark, with a studied indifference little suited to the emphatic words. 'Have some of this hot cake, Thornton? You are eating nothing.'

'Thanks; I don't know but I will,' says Chips, totally unabashed. 'You could hardly give me anything I like so well as hot cake for breakfast.'

'You will make a point of remembering that, I trust, Mrs. Carrington,' says Sir Mark, gravely.

'Phyllis, you would look such a good Deademona,' says Bébé, who is now fairly started. 'I am sure she must have been *very* young to let herself be beguiled into a marriage with that horrid Othello.'

'And who would represent the Moor?'

'Sir Mark, I suppose; he looks more like it than anyone else.'

'You flatter me, Miss Beatoun,' murmurs Sir Mark, with a slight bow.

'Oh, I only mean you are darker than any of the others, except James, and I am sure *he* never could look sufficiently ferocious,' answers Bébé, laughing.

'And you think I can?'

'You will have to. When we have blackened you a little and bent your eyebrows into a murderous scowl, and made you look thoroughly odious, you will do very well.'

'How one *does* enjoy the prospect of tableaux! I rather think I shall rival Salvini by the time I am out of your hands.'

'I hope not. I can't bear Salvini,' says Harriet, mildly.

'That is going rather far, Harry. Why don't you say you can't bear his figure? We *might* believe that?'

'But I don't want to be smothered,' I protest, nervously.

‘Oh, you *must* submit to that. When people hear of “a scene from Othello,” they immediately think of pillows. They would consider they had been done out of something if we gave them a mere court part. We will have you just dying, murmuring your last poor little words, with Sir Mark looking as if he were longing to try the effect of the bolster next; and Miss Vernon, as Emilia, kneeling beside you.’

‘Now, that is what I call a downright cheerful picture,’ says Marmaduke.

‘I call it high tragedy,’ replies Miss Beatoun, reprovingly. ‘*Will* you be Emilia, Miss Vernon?’

‘I will help you in any way I can,’ says Dora, with her usual gentle amiability.

‘You would make a capital Beatrice, Bébé,’ says Marmaduke. ‘We might have a good scene from “Much Ado about Nothing.” Who will be Benedick? Now, don’t all speak at once.’

‘I think it would suit me,’ says Chips, very modestly.

We all laugh heartily.

‘You grow modest, Mr. Thornton,’ says Sir Mark. ‘I fear you must be ill. Try a little of this honey; you will find it excellent.’

‘No, thanks. I feel I shall be able to pull through now until luncheon.’

‘Let us go into the library and arrange everything,’ I suggest, eagerly; and we all rise and go there.

By degrees, as the afternoon advances, the men show symptoms of fatigue and drop off one by one, while we women still keep together to discuss the all-engrossing idea.

Curious odds and ends of old-world finery are dragged from remote closets and brought to light. Clothes that once adorned Marmaduke’s ancestors are now draped round young white arms and necks, and draw forth peals of laughter from the lookers-on.

‘But we must have an audience,’ suggests Bébé at



length, rather blankly, stopping short, with her hands in the air, from which hangs down an ancient embroidered robe.

‘True. How shall we manage that?’

‘Send a groom instantly with invitations to the Hastings, the Leslies, and the De Veres, and the Cuppidges. I am positive they are all dying of *ennui* this moment, and will hail with rapture any chance of escape from it. They will all come; and the Leslies have two or three really very presentable young men staying with them.’

‘Yes, that will be best. Dora, will you go and write the notes for me? Now, would it not be a good thing to exclude all the non-players from our council?’

‘Oh,’ says Harriet, ‘then *I* must go.’

‘No, no, Harry, we can’t do without you,’ cry I, imploringly; ‘*you* must stay. We could not get on without some head to guide us and soothe down disappointed actors. You shall be wardrobe-woman and chief secretary and prime minister and stage-manager all in one.’

‘Yes,’ says Bébé, who has got herself into the ancient robe by this, ‘and head-centre and peace-maker, and all that sort of thing. Now, don’t I look sweet in this flowered gown? Ah! what interesting creatures our great-great-grandmothers must have been! It almost makes me long to be a great-great-grandmother myself.’

‘But your salary—your salary; state your terms,’ says Harriet. ‘I cannot be all that you have mentioned for nothing.’

‘For love, dearest—call you *that* nothing?’ replies Bébé, as she struts up and down before a long glass.

Presently darling mother, who has slept at Strange-more and breakfasted in her room, comes creeping in, and a dispute arises as to whether she must be excluded from the Cabinet and sent into exile until night reveals our secrets. But she is so amused at everything, and

has grown so young and gay in the absence of her bug-bear, that we make an exception in her favour also; and as she has a real talent for dressing people, and would have made an invaluable ladies' maid, had her lot been cast so low, we find her very useful later on.

The invitations are despatched, and acceptances from all brought back: everyone, it appears, will be delighted to come and witness our success or failure, as the case may be. These polite replies cause us faint pangs of consternation largely tinged with timidity, making us conscious that we are regularly in for something; that much is expected of us; and that after all the performance may prove 'flat, stale, and unprofitable.'

All through dinner we—the intended victims—are mysterious, not to say depressed; while Sir James Handcock, the two men from the barracks, and Sir George Ashurst make mild jokes at our expense and wish us safely out of it.

At nine the guests arrive; at half-past all is in readiness; the audience is seated, the impromptu curtains are drawn up, and 'Rebecca laying the jewels at Rowena's feet' stands revealed.

Lady Blanche Going, as the Jewess, is looking positively beautiful, as kneeling at Dora's feet in many-coloured garments of crimson-and-gold and such gorgeous shades, with much gleaming of precious stones, she gazes with saddened curiosity into the face above her; while Dora, raising her veil—my wedding veil—with uplifted arms to look down on her, presents such a contrast, with her dead white robe and fair babyish face, to the darker beauty's more glowing style as takes the audience by storm.

The applause is loud and lengthened; and Sir George Ashurst's enthusiasm reaches such a pitch that when it subsides he has to retire to his room in search of another pair of gloves.

The curtain rises for the second time on Lady

Blanche again and Sir Mark Gore, as 'The Huguenots.' This, too, is highly successful, albeit her ladyship is too dark for the part.

Everybody agrees that Mark, with the sorrowfully determined expression on his face, is perfect ; while Lady Blanche astonishes some of us by the amount of passionate pleading she throws into her eyes.

And now comes a hitch. The third tableau on which we have decided is 'The Last Appeal.' There has been considerable difficulty about the arrangement of this from the beginning, and now at the last moment Sir Mark Gore vows he will have nothing to do with it.

'I couldn't do it,' he says, throwing out his hands. 'There is no use in urging a fellow. I *could* look murderous, I *might* look sentimental—I could *not* appeal. I won't, and that's all about it. They will say there are no more actors if you send me on again so soon ; and besides, those breeches don't fit me. They will go on Chandos—let him take my part.'

'How disobliging you are!' says Miss Beatoun, flushing. 'Then I won't be the person appealed to. I did not want to all along. It is too bad I should get no parts but those in which rags and ugly dresses are worn. I shall have to do Cinderella presently in tatters, and in this I have only a short gown and nasty thick shoes, and a pitcher.'

'What nonsense!' say I. 'You know everyone said you looked delicious with that little handkerchief across your shoulders. Lord Chandos, go and dress yourself directly, as Sir Mark will not.'

'Of what use is it,' says Chandos, quietly, 'if Miss Beatoun declines to act with me ?'

'Acting with you has nothing to do with it,' returns Bébé, reddening perceptibly. 'I only decline the "old clo'" part of it. Consider how it hurts my vanity.'

'Yet you would have worn them had Sir Mark kept his word,' I say, in an injured tone.

At this Lord Chandos looks expressively at Miss Beatoun—Miss Beatoun looks witheringly at me; and Marmaduke, utterly innocent, says, persuasively—

‘Come, now, Bébé, that’s conclusive. Chandos will think you have some reason for it if you persist in refusing.

At this unfortunate remark even I feel some dismay. Considering all that has passed between these two, and the nature of the tableau in question, it *is* unfortunate. Chandos and Bébé colour violently; the latter’s fingers close with nervous force upon the pretty short gown she is wearing and crumple it recklessly. The loose cambric kerchief on her breast rises and falls with angry emotion. Chandos is evidently furious.

‘I shall think nothing of the kind,’ he says, in a low distinct tone. ‘Miss Beatoun should be allowed to please herself. For my part I think it an odious scene, and hackneyed to the last degree.’

‘Still, as it is on the cards——’ I murmur, weakly.

Marmaduke stares at me in wonderment and then at Harriet, who is also listening. We are everyone of us thoroughly unpleasant.

Bébé laughs rather a forced laugh. ‘I wonder what our friends in the dress circle are thinking all this time?’ she says. ‘Lord Chandos, go and put on your things, and don’t let us keep them waiting any longer.’

‘That’s right,’ exclaims Marmaduke, much relieved, moving away to another group in the distance engaged in a hot dispute. Still Chandos lingers.

‘I am sorry for this,’ he says to Bébé, in a low tone, almost haughtily. ‘But it is not yet too late. If the idea is so detestable to you, then give it up now, and I will support you.’

‘Why should it be distasteful to me?’ very coldly. ‘I will make no further objections.’

‘I hope you exonerate me. I could not help it. I am more vexed about it than you can be.’

‘I think you might have said emphatically just at first you did not wish it. However, it does not matter.’

‘How could I? Such a remark would have been an implied rudeness to you.’

‘Then I wish you had been rude.’

‘You are unreasonable, Miss Beatoun,’ says his lordship, stiffly. Then, in a still lower tone: ‘There are few things I would not do for you, but that is not one of them.’

‘I think you had better go and put on those garments Sir Marmaduke rejected. We can finish the argument later on,’ murmurs Bébé, turning away, with a half-smile; and Lord Chandos hurrying over his toilette, we have them on our miniature stage sooner than we dared to hope.

But though they gave in to their own wishes, or rather to their own pride, the performance is a failure; for though Bébé certainly manages to look the very personification of hardened persistency, Lord Chandos by no means comes up to our idea of the appealing and despairing adorer, and altogether there is a stony finish about it that nobody admires. The spectators are, indeed, polite and say all manner of pretty things; but they say them from the lips alone, which is palpable and not satisfactory.

And now comes my turn. The ‘British public,’ as Mr. Thornton insists on calling our very select audience, is requested to turn its kind attention on Tennyson’s ‘Sleeping Princess,’ wrapt in mystic slumber. I am the Sleeping Princess, it having struck me in the early part of the day that this  *rôle* , requiring little beyond extreme inaction, would exactly suit me, and cause me less trepidation.

Upon a crimson lounge, clad all in white, I lie, my long fair brown hair scattered across the cushions and falling to the ground beside me. One hand is thrown above my head, the other hangs listlessly, sleepily

downwards; a deep red rose has dropped from it, and now blushes, half-lost, amidst the tresses on the floor.

Sir Mark, in the character of the Prince, leans over me, as though in the act of giving the caress that brings me back from Dreamland. His face, I know, is near—so near that, between nervousness and shrinking, I feel a mad desire to break into forbidden laughter; so much so that when the curtain falls I am more than thankful.

Slowly it descends, and as I hear it touch the stage I cautiously open my eyes—to find Sir Mark has not yet raised himself from his stooping posture.

My eyes look straight into his. There are literally only a few inches between his face and mine, and I fancy I can discern a treacherous gleam in them. Something masterful, too, in his expression, as though he would say, ‘I could an’ I would,’ strikes me. Instantly I resent it, and, springing to my feet, stand back from him, crimson with indignation and some undefined fear.

There is no time for words, had I even the desire to speak, which I have not, as at this moment Lady Blanche Going and Marmaduke come from behind the scenes to congratulate us. I try to recover myself hurriedly, but it is too late; my red cheeks and frightened, half-shamed eyes attract their notice; and Marmaduke, glancing from me to Sir Mark, regards us earnestly, colouring very slowly himself the while.

‘Oh!’ exclaims her ladyship, starting, and assuming an air of surprise; then, with an affected laugh: ‘How foolish of me! But really for the moment, on account of your attitudes and stillness, I fancied I had come on too soon, and that you were still acting.’

‘How completely you must have forgotten the subject of the late tableau!’ replies Sir Mark, in a very calm tone, fixing her with his wonderful keen dark eyes.

Some instinct of evil makes me go and stand close to Marmaduke.

‘Was it a success?’ I ask, nervously.

‘Without doubt,’ says ‘Duke, rousing himself. ‘You look fatigued, Phyllis; come and have some wine.’

I take his arm and go with him gladly.

‘Did anything vex you, darling?’ he asks me quietly as we go into the next room.

‘No; it was imagination. I did not know his face was quite so close, and, in consequence, when I opened my eyes I got a start. It was ridiculous of me.’

‘Was that all?’

‘Yes, that was all.’ I laugh, though in a rather spiritless way, and feel angry with myself for the vague restraint that is quite discernible in my manner, while Marmaduke pours me out some claret-cup, without asking any more questions.

‘Duke—Marmaduke—where *are* you? Oh, come, come,’ cries Bébé, looking in, ‘we are all waiting for you. How can I pose properly until you get me the slipper? You said you had it somewhere.’

So ‘Duke flies, and I, putting from me my small vexation, which even already appears half-fanciful, follow him to the sides, to see how they look before the curtain rises.

Cinderella (Bébé), clad in picturesque rags, is represented in the act of flying, leaving behind her the magical slipper, which Master Chips is eagerly stooping to pick up. He makes a veritable ‘Prince Charming,’ in his scarlet cloak and long silk stockings—got no one knows how—and cap and feathers; while Bébé, glancing backwards in her flight to mark the fate of her shoe, casts upon him a bewitching languishing gaze that (supposing the original Cinderella to be capable of such another) must have had more to do with her being Princess later on than anything in the shape of a vow.

Then we close up Dora, as Constance de Beverley, into an imaginary wall—the poor nun, with raised

despairing eyes and downward clasped hands, creating much sympathy. Yet none of us feel sure this was the spirit in which the real Constance met her doom; only, as the devotional tearful style suits Dora, we conclude it was, and make no unwelcome inquiries; and everyone is charmed.

After this comes 'Queen Eleanor presenting the agreeable choice of the poisoned bowl or the dagger to the fair but frail Rosamond,' represented by Blanche Going and myself; at the conclusion of which Bébé draws me aside to whisper, laughingly, how Blanche had looked the part *con amore*.

'I would have given very little for your chance of life had there been any reality about it,' she says. 'She looked—oh! she looked as if——' with a vicious clenching of her small fist, full of meaning.

Bébé, as a laughing saucy Beatrice, and Lord Chandos as Benedick, make a much happier tableau than their last, and eventually we wind up with a scene from the 'Queen's Maries' of Whyte Melville, in which everybody generally is brought in, and where Blanche Going, as Marie Stuart, in black velvet and the inevitable cap, is the principal feature; though Bébé makes a very charming Seton, and even I feel some admiration on beholding Marmaduke as Darnley.

With a sense of relief we come down from the stage and mingle with our audience, accepting modestly the compliments showered upon us from all sides.

Mother, who has not been inside a theatre since she was nineteen, comes up to tell us it was the prettiest sight she ever saw, and to compare us favourably with all the celebrated actors and actresses of her time.

Presently we leave the scene of our triumphs and wander into the great cool ball-room, where the decorations of the foregoing evening are still to be seen. Then somebody orders in a piano, and somebody else sits down and begins to play on it, and in another minute or two we are all dancing.



‘I don’t believe poor Mary Hamilton ever had your laughing eyes,’ says Sir Mark to me, during a pause in the dance. ‘She must have been a sadder, more sedate sort of person altogether. See how differently love works in different people.’

‘You forget she was unhappy in hers. Besides’—saucily—‘how do you know love has anything to do with *my* eyes?’

‘I don’t know, of course; am only supposing——’

‘Never suppose. It is foolish, and—fatiguing. Though, now we are on the subject, Monsieur Chastelar, you shall give me your definition of the words “to love.” If we may accept Whyte Melville’s opinion of you, you must be a very competent judge.’

‘I have no theory of my own; I am a sceptic on that point. I will give you the orthodox definition if you wish, which everybody—in a novel—is bound to accept. It means, I fancy, to merge your own existence so entirely in that of another as to obliterate oneself and live only for him or her, as the case may be. Also, it would be strictly necessary to feel lost and miserable in the absence of the beloved one. You may call *that* fatiguing if you please. Do you like the picture? Horrible, isn’t it?’

‘Not only horrible but impracticable, I should say. I might manage to be supremely happy in the presence of the adored; I do *not* think I could be “miserable” exactly in his absence.’ Then, laughing: ‘Is that really “pure love?” If so, I am a sceptic too. It would be absurdly weak-minded, and would confine one’s happiness to too little a world, to indulge in such a belief. It must be wiser to take enjoyment as it comes in every way, and not to be so hopelessly dependent upon one.’

‘I entirely agree with you. Indeed, I fancy most people would agree with you,’ replies Sir Mark, carelessly, looking straight before him, with so much meaning in his gaze that instinctively I follow it, until my

eyes fall upon Lady Blanche Going, at the other end of the room.

Evidently tired and flushed from dancing, she has sunk with lazy grace into a low chair, and now, half-turning, is laughing up into Marmaduke's face, as he leans solicitously over her. Even as I look she raises her hand to repossess herself of the bouquet he holds, and to my impatience it seems that an unnecessarily long time elapses before the flowers go from his hand to hers.

My late careless frivolous words appear to mock me. Why does he look at her like that? Why is he always by her side? Are there no other women in the room?

I try to think of something gay and heartless to say to Sir Mark, but just at the moment nothing will come to me.

Again the vague jealousy of the evening before returns in twofold force, and I bring my teeth rather tightly together. After all Marmaduke said to me on the balcony last night about making myself conspicuous with one, it is, to say the least of it, rather inconsistent his own behaviour now.

What a perpetual simper that woman keeps up, merely to show the whiteness of her teeth! How pleased 'Duke appears to be with her inane conversation! Now, if I had ever loved him this probably would have vexed me; as it is——

Bah! I *will* think of something else.

I turn to Sir Mark, with a very successful little laugh.

'A living illustration of my text,' I say, bending my head in my husband's direction.

'Where? Oh! there.' He stares at Lady Blanche reflectively for a minute or so, and then says, 'She is certainly good-looking.'

"Good-looking!" How very faint! Surely she is handsome. Are you one of those who consider it impolitic to admire one woman to another?

‘As a rule I believe it to be a mistake,’ replies he, coolly: ‘but in this case I had no thought of policy. I am never quite sure that I do think her ladyship handsome. That she is generally thought so I admit. Marmaduke and she were always good friends.’

‘So I should say.’

‘At one time we imagined a *tendresse* there, and dreamed of a marriage, but, you see, ’Duke was bent on doing more wisely.’

‘Thanks. That is prettily put. Was the *tendresse* you speak of on her side or his?’

‘A mutual business, I fancy, if it existed at all. But, as we made a mistake in the principal part of it, we probably did so in all. Besides’—lightly—‘I ought not to tell *you* all this, Mrs. Carrington. Tales out of school are malicious. Such mere suppositions as they are, too.’

‘Why? Surely I may congratulate myself on having gained a victory over so much beauty? It would be a pity to deny me this little gratification.’

Nevertheless at heart I *am* sorely vexed, and, through pique and wounded feeling, make myself more than agreeable to Sir Mark for the evening. Not once does ’Duke come near me; nor does he even appear to notice my wilful flirtation.

Just before we break up, indeed, finding myself near to him in the supper-room, a strange desire to test his real mind towards me, to compel him to pay me some attention, seizes me. He is as usual in close attendance on Blanche Going, who has kept him chained to her side—willingly chained, without doubt, during greater part of the evening. Having dismissed my partner on some pretext, I look straight at Marmaduke, and, shivering slightly, say, ‘How cold it is!’

‘Cold?’ replies he, *nonchalantly*. ‘Is it? I thought it warm. Better send some one for a shawl. Here, Gore, will you get Mrs. Carrington something

warm to put round her? She finds a draught somewhere.'

And as Sir Mark departs obedient 'Duke turns once more to his companion, as though forgetful of my very existence. Lady Blanche smiles disagreeably.

Yesterday—surely only yesterday, he would have been kinder—he would have gone for this shawl himself. How eagerly, with what extreme tenderness has he ever anticipated my wants! And now the attentions of a stranger are considered good enough for me. Is he tired of me already? Has he so soon discovered the poverty of my charms? Or has that old fascination returned with redoubled power, to make him regret what is, alas! irrevocable?

Sick at heart, and mortified to the last degree, I turn away, yet with lifted head and proud disdainful lips, lest he or she should rightly guess my thoughts.

All the next day a marked coldness exists between me and my husband. We mutually avoid each other, and, the better to do so, fall back for conversation upon those nearest to us. The nearest to me, at all times, is Sir Mark Gore.

Not being by any means a 'gushing' pair, this temporary estrangement is unnoticed by the greater part of our guests; to the few, however, it is plainly visible. Bébé sees it, and is vexed and troubled. Sir Mark sees it, and is curious. Lady Blanche sees it, and is triumphant. It is clear that, for whatever end she has in view, all things are working well. Once or twice during the evening I catch her eyes fixed upon me, and as I do so her glance falls slowly, while a malignant insolent smile creeps round her mouth. At such moments I am pagan in my sentiments, and would, if it were possible, call down all evil things upon my enemy.

Next day, however, the clouds partially disperse. Naturally forgiving, I find a difficulty in retaining

wrath for any lengthened period, and Marmaduke appears only too glad to meet my advances.

The third day, indeed, all seems forgotten—our animosity is laid—and peace is proclaimed. This time, however, there has been no explanation, no kindly reconciliation, and only Marmaduke and I know that underneath our perfect amiability lies a thin stratum of ice, that any chance cold may harden into hopeless solidity.

‘Phyllis, we have agreed to let the birds hold high holiday to-morrow, if you will promise us a picnic. It seems a pity to let this last glimpse of summer go by unmarked,’ says Marmaduke, speaking to me from the foot of the dinner-table.

‘Oh, how delightful!’ cry I, flushing with pleasure, and dodging all the flowers on the table to get a good look at his face. As he is also carefully dodging them in his turn, with the like laudable purpose of beholding me, it is some time before we manage it. When our eyes do meet we smile sympathetically.

I hardly know why I do so, but as I withdraw my gaze from Marmaduke I turn it upon Sir Mark Gore, who sits at my right hand. The curiously cold calculating expression I meet startles and somewhat displeases me.

‘Do you not like picnics?’ I ask him, abruptly.

‘Very much indeed. Why should you think otherwise?’

‘Your expression just now was not one of pleasure.’

‘No? It ought to have been. I was inwardly admiring the charming enthusiasm with which you received your husband’s proposition.’

‘Oh!’ return I, curtly. ‘Yes. As I told you once before, when I am pleased I show it; and I am more than pleased now—I am enchanted.’ Smiling brightly again at the thought. ‘Do you know I have not been at a picnic since I was a girl—that is, unmarried?’

‘Not since *then*? Why, you must almost forget

what a picnic means. Shall I refresh your memory? It means salted pies—and sugared fowl—and indescribable jellies and warm fluids—and your knees in your mouth—and flies. I don't myself know anything more enjoyable than a picnic.'

'Dear me, how I pity you! Whose picnics have you been at, may I ask?' inquire I, with scorn. 'To-morrow, I promise you, you shall see a very different specimen.'

To-morrow comes to us as fine as though bespoken. Lady Blanche, walking into the breakfast-room in the charmingest of morning robes, addresses herself to my husband.

'Well, most noble, what are your plans for to-day?' she asks, with a pretty show of animation.

Though I am in the room, and she knows it, she takes no notice of me whatever—does not even trouble herself so far as to bestow upon me the courtesy of a 'Good morning.' She looks up at Marmaduke and smiles at him, and awaits his answer, as though he alone were to be consulted. Evidently in her opinion the mistress of the house is of no importance—a mere nonentity, in fact—the master is everything.

It occurs to me that she might be even gracious enough to smile in my direction, but she confines her attentions entirely to Marmaduke.

Has anyone else in the room noticed her insolence? There is rather a hush, I fancy, as I move composedly to my seat and alter the cups and saucers into more regular rows. I wonder curiously whether Marmaduke has remarked her breach of etiquette. Not he! What man ever saw anything wrong where a pretty woman is the transgressor, more especially when that pretty woman's blandishments are directed towards him? He gives back her smile placidly, and then speaks.

'I believe we have decided on a picnic.'

'The picnic, of course. But *where*? That is the question.'

‘Anywhere you like—I am yours to command.’

‘You really mean it? Then I should like to go right through the country to St. Siebird’s well. It is years since last I was there.’ She breathes a soft sigh, as though recalling some tender memory connected with her former visit.

‘To the Wishing Well?’ says ‘Duke. That is a long drive. The day is fine, however, and I see nothing to prevent our doing it. Can we manage it, do you think, Phyllis?’

‘I see no obstacle in the way,’ I answer, indifferently, without raising my eyes.

‘Then we may consider it a settled plan—may we, Mrs. Carrington?’ says Lady Blanche, sweetly.

This time I do lift my head, and turn my eyes slowly upon her ladyship’s.

‘Good morning, Lady Blanche,’ I say, quietly, with the utmost composure. In spite of herself she is disconcerted.

‘Oh! good morning,’ she says. ‘I quite fancied I had seen you somewhere before this morning.’

‘Did you? You take coffee, I think, Sir George? Dora, give Sir George some coffee.’

‘I think I deserve a vote of thanks for my suggestion,’ says Blanche, recovering. ‘I feel in great spirits myself already. The drive will do us good, and make us all as fresh as possible.’

‘True,’ says Marmaduke; ‘we have not had a drive for some time. A picnic near home is, I believe, a mistake. It is a capital idea, Phyllis, is it not?’

He addresses himself to me in a rather anxious, not to say conciliatory tone—for the first time he becomes aware of my unusual silence.

‘Excellent. Though, for my part I hardly require a drive as a tonic. I am always as fresh as I can be.’ (I cannot resist this one little thrust.) ‘Mr. Thornton’—to Chips, who has just entered—‘come and sit here by me—there is more room.’

For the first time in my life I feel my youth an advantage as I watch the faint colour rise to her ladyship's cheeks. Her mouth changes its expression. It is no longer complacent. At this moment I feel she hates me with a bitter hatred, and am partly comforted.

A brief smile quivers beneath Sir Mark's moustache; it is scarcely there when it is gone again, and he drops his eyes discreetly on his plate.

'How shall we go?' asks 'Duke. 'We have the coach and your trap, Ashurst, and the open carriage—will that be enough? Harriet, what will suit you?'

'I shall stay at home, thank you,' says Harriet, smiling. 'I know I am letting myself down in your estimation horribly; but I confess I detest long drives. I believe I detest anything lengthened. I am naturally fickle' (she is the most sincere creature alive). 'I shall enjoy lounging about at home, looking at the flowers and reading, and that.'

'Indeed, Harriet, you shall not,' cry I, impetuously. 'We would all be miserable without you.'

'That's a fact, Lady Handcock,' puts in Chips, heartily.

'Chippendale, you almost make me relent,' says Harriet, smiling. 'But'—in a piteous aside to me—'do not compel me to go. It is twelve miles there, and twelve miles back, if it is a yard—just think of that! My poor back would not stand it. James shall go and represent me.'

'Why not change the place, and name a spot nearer home?' says Dora, quietly. Dora always does the correct thing.

'Just so,' exclaims Sir George, who would have thought Jericho a very convenient spot had Dora so named it. 'We have another Wishing Well somewhere in the neighbourhood—eh, 'Duke?'

'The Deacon's Well,' says Sir Mark, 'is only seven miles from this — would that be too far, Lady Handcock?'



‘I shall be quite unhappy if you make me the disturber of the peace,’ says Harriet, in comic despair. ‘Let me stay at home—I shall do very well—and at present I feel ashamed of myself.’

‘Nonsense!’ says ‘Duke. ‘If you don’t come willingly we shall carry you. So you may as well make up your mind to visit the Deacon.’

‘And it is really the prettiest well of the two,’ says Blance, gracefully, as she sees her cause fall to the ground.

‘Then you and Blanche can keep each other company on the coach, Phyllis, and anyone else that likes. Thornton shall have the horn—it is about the one instrument on which he can perform with marked success.’

‘I shall take the phaeton and my ponies,’ say I, quietly. ‘They have not been out for two days, and it will do them good. Exercise is the only thing that keeps them in order.’

‘Oh, nonsense, Phyllis; you will find it much pleasanter with Blanche and the rest of us.’

‘Without doubt; but then I have set my heart on driving my ponies. They are my hobby at present; so you must excuse my bad taste if I say I prefer being with them to even the good company you mention. That is, if I can get anyone to come and take care of me.’

‘I shall be most happy, Mrs. Carrington, if you will accept me as your escort,’ says Sir Mark, instantly, as though desirous of being the first to offer his services.

Blanche Going raises her head and regards him fixedly. In the velvet softness of her dark eyes shines for an instant an expression that is half reproach, half passionate anger; only for an instant; then turning her glance on me, she meets my gaze full, and sneers unmistakably. I feel radiant, triumphant. At least I have it in my power to give her sting for sting.

‘Thank you,’ I say to Sir Mark, with a beaming

smile. 'I shall feel quite safe and happy in my mind with you. At heart I believe I am a coward, so feel it pleasant to know there will be help at hand, if the ponies prove refractory.'

'You had better take a groom with you, Phyllis,' says my husband, shortly.

'Oh, no, thank you. It will be quite unnecessary. Sir Mark, I know, is as good as two or three grooms in a case of emergency.'

'Nevertheless, I think you had better have a groom. Those ponies are generally skittish after any idleness. I shall tell Markham to accompany you.'

'Pray do not give yourself the trouble,' I reply, obstinately; 'I shall not need him. You do not think there is any cause for fear, do you, Sir Mark?'

'I think not. I think I am a match for your ponies at any moment,' returns he, smiling.

'In my opinion grooms are a mistake in a small carriage,' murmurs Lady Blanche, addressing the table generally. 'There is something unpleasant in the fact that they are close behind one's back ready to hear and repeat every idle word one may chance to utter.' Her smile as she says this is innocence itself.

'I fully agree with you,' answer I, equably; 'though Sir Mark and I are above uttering anything idle.'

Marmaduke frowns, and the conversation ends.

Meantime the others have been eagerly discussing their plans. Sir George Ashurst has obtained a promise from Dora to take the seat beside him on his dog-cart. Harriet has decided on the open carriage, and declares her intention of calling and taking up mamma. Lord Chandos alone has had no part in the discussion.

Just then the door opens to admit Bébé, fresh and gay, as usual. Positively, we have all forgott n Bébé.

'Late—late—so late!' says she, laughing. 'Yes, Marmaduke, I know it is actually shocking. Don't say a word, dear; your face is a volume in itself.'

Good morning, everybody. Phyllis, *you* don't look formidable. I shall have my chair near you.'

The men rise, and somebody gets her a seat.

'Bébé, we forgot you,' cry I, contritely. 'Where shall we put you now?'

'Put me?' says Bébé, regarding her chair. 'Why, here, I suppose.'

'No, no—about our drive to the Wishing Well, I mean. We have just been arranging everything, and somehow you got left out.'

'I have still two seats at the back of my trap,' says Ashurst; 'will you accept one, Miss Beatoun? And Chandos can have the other.'

The faintest possible tinge of colour rises to Bébé's cheek.

'A back seat! Oh! Sir George, is that all you can offer me? I was never so insulted in my life. It is positively unkind. Marmaduke, why did not you look after my interests in my absence?'

'I don't know how it happened. First come, first served, I suppose.'

'The unkindest cut of all. 'Duke, you are ungenerous, or else in a bad temper—which? However, I forgive you.'

'I would give you the front seat,' say good-natured George, 'but I fear those very tiny little hands would never be able for the ribbons; and I have given the other to Miss Vernon.'

'Miss Beatoun, have my place,' says Thornton, eagerly. 'I daresay Miss Hastings will get on without me, even if she comes; and Powell can blow the horn.'

Dora comes forward gracefully. 'Take mine,' she says, in spite of a reproachful glance from Sir George. 'I don't in the least mind where I sit.'

'*Embarras des richesses!*' cries Bébé, laughing, putting up her hands to cover her ears. 'Not for all the world, Miss Vernon. Thank you very much all the

same. Did you think I was in earnest? If the truth be told, I like nothing better than the back seat on anything, if the horses be fast. There is something delicious, almost sensational, in finding oneself flying through the air without seeing what is taking one. I only hope I shan't fall off.'

'It will be Chandos' fault if you do,' declares Sir George. 'Do you hear, Chandos? You will have to keep your eyes open, and be careful every time we come to a corner.'

Bébé colours again, and glances at Lord Chandos, who by a curious coincidence she finds glancing at her. Their eyes meet.

'Will you find the task too arduous?' she asks, mischievously, for once losing sight of her coldness.

'I will tell you that when we return,' replies he, answering her smile.

Not until the others have well departed does Markham bring round the ponies; and as he puts the reins into my hands he utters a gentle warning.

'I thought it safer to let the other horses get a bit of a start first, ma'am,' he says. 'You might spare the whip to-day, I'm thinking; they're that fresh as it will give you enough to do to hold 'em.'

'All right, Markham,' says my companion, gaily; 'I will see your mistress does not irritate them to madness.'

The pretty animals in question toss their heads knowingly, then lower them, and finally start away down the avenue, round the corner, past the beeches, and out into the open road.

The air is fresh and soft, the speed, to say the least of it, enlivening, and for a mile or so I know thorough enjoyment; then my arms begin to drag.

'How they do pull!' I say, with a petulant sigh.

'Let me have the reins,' exclaims Sir Mark, eagerly; 'you will be exhausted if you try to hold those fretful creatures for the next six miles. You are hardly strong

enough for the task.' And, with a gesture that is almost relief, I resign to him my seat.

'That would be the nearest road to Carston, supposing we had started from Summerleas,' I say presently, as we come to one particular turn. 'Oh, how often, long ago, I used to travel it! What years and years and years seem to have gone by since last spring! What changes have occurred! And yet in reality only a few short months have passed.'

'Happy changes, I hope, Mrs. Carrington.'

'For me? Yes indeed. When first you knew me I was the most insignificant person amongst us at home, and now I think I have all I ever wished for.'

Sir Mark smiles.

'I never heard anyone say that before. Of what use will the Deacon's Well be to you? Do you mean to tell me you have no wish left ungratified?'

'Well, perhaps there are a few things I would willingly put out of my way,' I reply, with a faint recurrence in my own mind to Lady Blanche Going.

'Only things? You are fortunate. When I go in for that useless sort of wishing it is people—not *things*—I would have removed. Were I you, Mrs. Carrington, I believe I should live in a perpetual state of terror, waiting for some blow to fall to crush such excessive happiness. You know one cannot be prosperous for ever.'

'I never anticipate evil,' return I, lightly. 'Surely it is bad enough when it comes, without adding to it by being miserable beforehand. Why, how doleful you look! What is it? You remind me of some youthful swain in love for the first time in his life.'

'Perhaps I am.'

'In love? How amusing! With whom then? Bébé? Dora? Or some person or persons unknown? Come, surely you may confide with all safety in your hostess.'

'She is the last person I would choose as a confidante

on this occasion. The sympathy she would accord me would be very scanty.'

'Oh, how unjust! Have I proved myself so utterly heartless? And is sympathy so very needful in your case—is it a hopeless one?'

'Quite so.'

'Poor Sir Mark! "If she be not fair to me, what care I how fair she be?" is a very good motto—why not adopt it, and—love again? I have heard there is nothing easier.'

'Would you find it easy?'

'I don't know, having never tried. But if to love is to be unhappy I wonder people ever let themselves fall into the snare.'

'You speak as if you yourself were free from the gentle passion,' says Sir Mark, with a searching look, under which I colour and feel somewhat confused.

'We were talking of second lovers,' I say, hurriedly. 'One hears of them. I was advising you to turn your attention that way. Surely it would be possible.'

'I don't believe in it—at least to me it would be impossible,' replies Sir Mark, in a low tone, and silence falls upon me.

Once again I am in the ball-room at Strangemore, listening to a tale of early love. Is Sir Mark thinking of Marmaduke now, I wonder, and the story he then told me, of his old infatuation for his cousin Blanche? Was it more than an infatuation—a passing fancy? Was it an honest, lasting attachment? And have I secured but the tired, wornout remnant of a once strong passion?

My changeful spirits, so prone to rise, so easy to dash to earth, again forsake me. Discontented and uncertain, I sit with lowered lids and fretful, puckered brow.

'Do you, then, think a man can love but once in his life?' I force myself to ask, though with open hesitation.

‘But once? Is it not enough? Would you condemn anyone to suffer the restless misery, the unsatisfied longing a second time?’ responds he, moodily.

‘No; but it is bad for those who come after,’ I reply, with deep dejection.

‘They must take their chance. The suffering cannot be all on one side. We must accept our share of misery as it comes with the best grace we can.’

‘I will not,’ I cry, passionately. ‘All my life I have determined to be happy, and I will succeed. Whatever happens, whatever comes of it, I refuse to be miserable.’

‘What a child you are!’ says he, almost pityingly.

‘I am not. I am talking quite rationally. I firmly believe we all make half our own grievances.’

‘And what becomes of the other half?’

‘Let us leave the subject,’ I say, petulantly, ignoring my inability to answer him. ‘You are very dull and prosy. If you insist on being a martyr, be one, but do not insist also on my following in your footsteps. Because you choose to imagine yourself unhappy is no reason why I should not be gay.’

‘Certainly not,’ replies he, with increasing gloom, and brings the whip down sharply across the ponies’ backs.

Instantly, almost as the lash touches their glossy skins, they resent the insult. The carriage receives a violent shock. They fling themselves backwards on their haunches, and in another moment are flying wildly on, regardless of bit or curb or rein.

As I realise the situation I grow mad with fright. Losing all sense of self-control, I rise from my seat and prepare to throw myself out of the phaeton. Surely the hard and stony road must be preferable to this reckless deadly flight.

Seeing my intention, Sir Mark rises also.

‘Phyllis, are you mad?’ cries he, flinging his arms round me. ‘Your only chance is to remain quiet. Phyllis, be sensible. Sit down when I desire you.’

There is an almost savage ring in his tone. He holds me fast and forces me down into my seat. I struggle with all my strength for a moment or two to free myself from his strong grasp, and then a coldness covers me and I faint.

When my senses return to me I find I am still in the carriage. The ponies are also to be seen, motionless in their places, except for the trembling that convulses their frames, while a fierce snort every now and then, and tiny flecks of foam that fly hither and thither and mingle with those already to be seen upon their backs and harness, betray their late irritation. But we are safe, apparently, quite safe.

Sir Mark's arm is supporting me, while with his other hand he holds something to my lips. It is that detestable thing called brandy, and I turn my head aside.

'Take it,' urges he, in a low trembling tone; 'whether you like it or not, it will do you good. Try to swallow some.'

I do as I am bid, and presently, feeling better, raise myself to look round for symptoms of a smash.

'What have they done?' I ask, with a shudder. 'Have they——'

'Nothing,' replies he, with a laugh that is rather forced. 'It was a mere bolt. If you had not fainted you would have known it was all over in a few minutes.'

'It was the whip,' I whisper, still nervous.

'Yes, it was all my fault. I quite forgot Markham's caution. I have to apologise very sincerely for my mistake.'

'Never mind apologies,' I say, laughing, 'as we are safe. I never remember being so terrified in my life—not even when my steed nearly deposited me in the middle of the High Street in Carston. And you,' I continue, in a half-amused tone, peering at him from under my hat; 'you were frightened too? Confess it.'

'I was,' returns he, carefully evading my gaze.



‘But why, if, as you say, there was no danger?’

‘There are worse things than runaway ponies—your fainting, for instance. I thought you were never going to open your eyes again, you looked so horribly white and cold—so like death.’

‘What a lovely picture!’ laughing involuntarily. ‘Well, console yourself; you have seen what nobody else ever saw—Phyllis Carrington fainting. I had no idea I had it in me. I really think I must be growing delicate or weak-minded.’

In silence Sir Mark gathers up the reins, and once more the ponies start forward.

‘Now, Dora can faint to perfection,’ I go on, finding immense enjoyment in my subject. ‘If she is vexed or troubled in any way, or hears thunder, she can go off gracefully into the arms of whoever happens to be nearest to her at the time. She never falls; it is indeed wonderful how accurately she can measure distance, even at the last moment. While as for me I do believe if I were scolded until nothing more was left to be said, or if it thundered and lightened from this until to-morrow, it would not have the effect of removing my senses. At least up to this I have found it so—for the future I shall be less certain. But how silent you are, and how cross you look! Still thinking of the obdurate fair one?’

‘Of her—and many other things.’

‘Well, perhaps she too is thinking of you.’

‘I can imagine nothing more probable,’ with a grim smile.

‘Neither can I.’ My treacherous spirits are again ascending. ‘Let me describe her to you as at this moment I almost think I can see her. Seated in a bower, enshrined in roses and honeysuckles, with her hands folded listlessly upon her lap, and her large dreamy black eyes (I am sure her eyes are black) filled with repentant tears, she is now remembering with what cruel coldness she received your advances;

while unmolested the pretty earwigs run races all over her simple white dress—simple but elegant, you know——’

‘H’m—yes.’

‘And now remorse has proved too much for her: she resolves on writing you a letter expressing contrition for her past heartlessness. She draws towards her paper, pens, and ink (in a three-volume novel the heroine has everything at her hand, even in the most unlikely places—there is never any fuss or scramble), and indites you a perfumed and coroneted note, which you will receive—to-morrow. There! Now, don’t you feel better?’

‘Infinitely so.’

‘What! still frowning—still in the lowest depths? I begin to doubt my power to comfort you.’

‘I don’t feel any inclination to jest on the subject,’ returns Sir Mark, gruffly, making a vicious blow with the whip at an unoffending and nearly lifeless fly.

‘Well, there,’ I gasp, in a sudden access of terror lest he might again incense the ponies, ‘I will jest no more. And don’t despair. Perhaps—who knows?—she may grow fond of you in time.’

He laughs a short bitter laugh that yet has something in it of dismal merriment. ‘If I could only tell you,’ he says, ‘if you only knew, you would understand what a double mockery are such words coming from your lips.’

His fingers close round the whip again. Again frightened, I hastily clutch his arm.

‘Don’t do that,’ I entreat; ‘please do not use that dreadful whip again—remember the last time you did so we were nearly killed.’

‘I wish we had been altogether so,’ mutters he, savagely.

I stare at him in speechless surprise. Did that flask contain *much* brandy? What on earth has happened to our careless, debonair Sir Mark?

Even as I gaze in wonder he turns his head and looks with some degree of shame into my widely opened astonished eyes.

‘Pardon me,’ he says, gently. ‘I don’t know what has come to me to-day. I fail to understand myself. I doubt I am an ill-tempered brute, and have hardly any right even to hope for your forgiveness.’

But his manner has effectually checked my burst of eloquence, and we keep unbroken silence until we reach our destination.

Here we find Marmaduke and Lady Blanche, anxiously on the look-out for us; the others, tired of waiting, have wandered farther afield. Marmaduke is looking rather white and worried, I fancy.

‘What has kept you until this hour?’ he asks, irritably, pulling out his watch.

‘Oh, how long you have been!’ supplements Blanche. ‘We were beginning to wonder—almost to fear an accident had occurred. It is quite a relief to see you in the flesh.’

‘You were very near not seeing us,’ I explain. ‘The ponies behaved very badly—ran away with us for half a mile or so—and frightened me so much that I fainted.’

‘How distressing!’ says Blanche, apparently much concerned. ‘How terrified you must have been! And so unpleasant too, without a lady near to help you! You were able to recover, Mrs. Carrington, at all events. To Sir Mark.

‘Well, I don’t suppose I would have been of much use without the brandy,’ replies he, coolly.

‘It must have been quite a sentimental scene,’ remarks her ladyship, with a little laugh. ‘It reminds one of something one would read—only, to make it perfect, you should be lovers. Now that you are safe it does not seem unkind to laugh—does it?’

Marmaduke by this time is black as night. In spite of myself I know I have blushed crimson; while

Sir Mark, turning abruptly away, goes to explain some trivial break in the harness to one of the coachmen.

‘It is a pity, Phyllis, you would not take my advice this morning,’ says ‘Duke, in a voice that trembles a little, either from suppressed anger or some other emotion. ‘If you had taken a groom, as I begged of you, all this unpleasantness might have been saved.’

‘I don’t see how a groom could have prevented it,’ I reply, coldly. ‘Without a second’s warning they were off—it was nobody’s fault.’

‘My dear ‘Duke, we should be thankful they have escaped so well,’ murmurs Blanche, in her softest tones, laying a soothing touch upon my husband’s arm. Both touch and tone render me furious. ‘I daresay it was not very serious.’

‘I daresay not; but it might have been. And, whether or not, it has kept everyone waiting for at least three-quarters of an hour.’

‘It might have kept you still longer had I been killed,’ I return, quietly, moving away in secret indignation.

Marmaduke follows me, leaving Blanche and Sir Mark to come after, and side by side, but speechless, we proceed on our way.

At length, in a rather milder tone, Marmaduke says: ‘I hope—otherwise—your drive was enjoyable.’

‘Very much so, thank you. Though I must say I don’t care about feeling my life in danger. I hope you enjoyed yours.’

‘No’—shortly—‘I did not; I never enjoyed anything less.’

‘How unfortunate! Was her ladyship thoughtful or ill-tempered, or what?’

‘She had nothing to do with it. I was thinking of you the entire time.’

‘Of me! How good of you! I am so sorry I cannot return the compliment, but no one was farther

from my thoughts than you. Concluding you were happy, I dismissed you from my memory.'

'I had a presentiment about those ponies.'

'Ah! it was the ponies occupied your mind—not their mistress. That sounds far more natural.'

'They are vicious, and not to be depended upon,' continues 'Duke, declining to notice my interruption. 'I shall dispose of them the very first opportunity.'

'Indeed you shall do nothing of the kind. They are mine, and I will not have them sold.'

'Well, keep them, if you insist upon it; but certainly you shall never drive them again.'

'Then I certainly shall; and to-morrow most probably. I will not be ordered about as though I were a mere baby.'

Marmaduke turns, and regards me so steadily and gravely that at length in spite of myself my eyes submit and droop.

'Phyllis, how changed you are!' says he presently, in a low tone. 'When first I knew you—even two months ago—you were a soft, tender, gentle little girl; and now you are always unjust and bitter—to me, at least.'

Something rises in my throat and prevents my utterance. Large tears gather in my eyes.

'I *am* changed—I know it,' I burst out suddenly. 'Before I married you I was a different person altogether. And how can I help being "bitter" at times? Even now, when I told you how near death I had been, you showed no feeling of regret—thought of nothing but the delay I had occasioned you and your friends.'

'Oh, Phyllis!' says 'Duke, in a tone that implies I have wrung his heart by my false accusations, and before either of us can again speak we have passed a hillock and are in full view of our guests.

They are all scattered about in twos and threes, though none are very far distant from the others; and the scene is more than usually picturesque. Certainly

the old Deacon knew what he was about when he placed his well in this charming spot. It is a little fairy-like nook, fresh and green—lying forgotten amongst the hills. A few pieces of broken-down ivy-covered wall partially conceal the steps leading to the Wishing Well.

‘Duke, let us wish for dinner—and *get it*—before we wish for anything else,’ entreats Bébé. ‘The drive has given me a horrible appetite. I am generally a very nice person—eh, Mr. Thornton?—but just at present I am feeling a downright unladylike desire for food. Phyllis, darling, do say you are hungry.’

‘I am—starving,’ I reply, though conscious at the moment that the smallest morsel would choke me.

‘Yes, by all means. “Business first, pleasure afterwards,”’ quotes Chips, blithely, who is stretched full length by Miss Beatoun’s side, with his hat off and a straw in his mouth, looking extremely handsome and unspeakably happy. Lord Chandos is at her other side, though rather farther away.

‘What do you say, Phyllis?’ asks ‘Duke, looking at me.

‘Do not take me into consideration at all,’ I return, in a suppressed voice. ‘Dinner now, or in five hours to come, would be quite the same thing to me.’

I move quickly away from him towards mamma as I say this, and, sinking down on the turf very close to her, slip my hand into hers; and as I feel her gentle fingers closing upon mine a sense of safety and relief creeps slowly over me.

Dinner progresses; and, though I will not acknowledge it, I begin to feel decidedly better. Fragments of conversation float here and there.

‘I have a great mind to set my little dog at you,’ says Bébé, in reply to some flagrant compliment bestowed upon her by the devoted Chips. A little *bijou* of a dog, with an elaborate collar and beseeching eyes, that sits upon her knee and takes its dinner from her pretty white fingers, is the animal in question.

‘Oh, please, don’t,’ murmurs Chips, pathetically; ‘I am so horribly afraid of your little dog. You would not like me to die of nervous excitement, would you?’

‘I am not so sure. It would make room for a better man.’

‘Impossible. There isn’t a better fellow going than I am. You ask my mamma when you see her.’

‘I need not ask anybody; I can see for myself. What do you do all day long but play billiards?’

‘I beg your pardon, Miss Beatoun. You estimate my capabilities at a very improper level. I do no end of things besides billiards—I shoot, smoke, eat, and—talk to you.’

‘What a way to spend one’s life!’ severely. ‘I wonder where you think you will go when you die?’

‘I hope wherever you go. I say’—piteously—‘don’t scold a fellow on such a splendid day—don’t—it’s uncommon afflicting of you; and don’t put on your gloves for a little longer.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I like looking at your hands, though at the same time they always irritate me. They are the very prettiest I ever saw; and—forgive me for saying it—but I always want to kiss them. Now, don’t begin again, please—remember you have lectured me for a good hour.’

‘Then I have wasted a good hour and done nothing. I give you up—you are past cure.’

‘I remember coming here once before,’ breaks in Lottie Hastings’ voice, ‘and wishing for something, and I really got it before the year was out.’

‘Must one wait a whole year?’ asks Sir Mark. ‘Then I shall have to write mine down. Give you my word if my own name was suppressed for a year I don’t believe I would recollect what it was at the end of it.’

‘Are we bound by law to name our wishes?’ asks Chips, earnestly. ‘Because, if so, I shall have to sink into the ground with shame. I’m horrid bashful—that

is my most glaring fault, you know, Miss Beatoun--and I would not disclose my secret desire for anything you could offer.'

'For anything I could offer,' repeats Miss Beatoun. 'Are you sure? Shall I tempt you? Would you not, for instance, take——' The eyes say the rest.

'Don't,' exclaims Thornton, putting his hands over his ears. 'I won't listen to you. I refuse to understand. Miss Hastings, will you permit me to sit by you? Miss Beatoun is behaving with more than her usual cruelty.'

'Come,' says Miss Hastings, smiling, and putting aside her dress, to give him room to seat himself on the grass near her.

As Chips leaves Bébé, Lord Chandos quietly slips into his place, to Miss Beatoun's evident surprise.

'Is it fair to encourage that poor boy so very openly?' begins Chandos, calmly.

'What?' says Miss Beatoun.

'Is it kind to flirt so much with young Thornton?' repeats Lord Chandos, still perfectly calm.

'You must make a mistake,' says Bébé, provokingly. 'You know I never flirt. In the first place, I don't consider it good form.'

'Neither do I consider it "good form" for a young lady to talk slang,' very gravely and quietly. 'I wouldn't do it if I were you.'

'How do you know what you would do if you were I?'

'At all events, you must acknowledge it is not becoming.'

'Do you profess to understand what is becoming to young ladies? Have you been studying them? Come, then, if you are so good a judge, I will ask you to tell me if this hat is so very becoming as they all say. Look well, now, before you decide; it is a question of the utmost importance.'

This saucy little speech is accompanied by such a



bewitching glance from under the said hat that Lord Chandos loses his presence of mind. 'I cannot bear to see you flirt so much as you do with everyone,' he mutters, hastily; 'it tortures me. Bébé, why is it?'

Miss Beatoun grows decidedly white, even to her lips, yet is still thoroughly composed.

'But *do* I flirt?' she says. 'I don't believe I do. Do you believe it, my darling, my treasure, my Tito?' to the dog. 'Not you. No, no, Lord Chandos, it is not that at all.'

'What is it, then? impatiently.

'Why, it is "everyone" who flirts with me, to be sure. And that is not my fault, is it?' with the most bewildering assumption of injured innocence.

And now we all rise and saunter towards the well.

'If you would only wish as I do,' whispers Sir George to Dora, 'I would be the happiest man alive.'

'Would you?' says innocent Dora. 'But how shall I know what you are longing for?'

'Can you not guess?'

'I am afraid I cannot. Unless perhaps—but no, of course it would not be that. Indeed, I do not know how to reach your thoughts. One must want so many things.'

'I want only one.'

'Only one! Oh, how moderate! Only one. Let me see,' with a deliciously meditative air and two slender fingers pressed upon her lips.

'Shall I tell you?'

'Oh, no, no,' with a pretty show of eager fear. 'If you told anyone, the charm would be broken, and you would not get what you want. Perhaps—who knows?—the boon I am going to demand will be the very thing you would tell me.' This with a sufficiently tender glance from the lustrous azure eyes.

'For my part,' says Bébé, wilfully, 'I shall wish for something I can never get, just to prove how absurd it all is.'

‘From time to time we everyone of us do that,’ says Chandos. ‘We hanker after the impossible. I begin to fear I shall never get my heart’s desire.’ He glances expressively at Bébé.

‘Then think of something else,’ suggests that young lady, smoothly. ‘Your second venture may be more successful.’

‘No, I shall keep to my original wish, until I either gain it or else find further hoping folly.’

‘Phyllis, it is your turn now. Will you not descend and court fortune?’ calls Harriet.

I am deeply engaged listening to mamma while she reads to me Billy’s last effusion from Eton, to which place he returned the second day after our ball.

‘It is a pity to disturb Mrs. Carrington,’ says Sir Mark. ‘She told me this morning she had not a wish left ungratified.’

Marmaduke raises his head quickly, and, flushing warmly, turns a pleased and rather surprised glance on me.

‘Nevertheless, I will come,’ I cry, incautiously, springing to my feet, ‘and beg for the continuance of my happiness, which includes everything.’

‘Oh, Phyllis!’ cries Bébé.

‘Oh, Mrs. Carrington,’ exclaims Sir Mark, ‘what a rash proceeding! Why did you say it aloud? You have destroyed every chance of receiving that good gift.’

‘Yes?’ say I, ‘how provoking! Never mind, contentment still remains; and that, I have heard, is quite as much to be desired.’

Everybody laughs heartily, and Marmaduke says: ‘You will get nothing, Phyllis, if you declare your wants so openly.’

‘Neither happiness nor contentment? How dismal!’ exclaim I, laughing too. ‘Well, I shall keep my third and last thought to myself.’

And, having hoped in my own mind that Lord Chandos would very soon again ask Bébé to be his wife,

I go through the form of drinking a little of the pure spring-water Master Chips proffers me with due solemnity.

The principal business of the day being concluded, our party once more breaks up into detachments, some straying out of sight in pretended search of scenery, some following their example in an opposite direction without any pretence at all.

Sinking down again by mother's side, I content myself with her and Harriet, while Marmaduke and Sir James stay to bear us company, and smoke unlimited cigars, while offering a lazy remark every now and then.

'Do you feel no desire to investigate the neighbourhood?' asks Sir Mark of me, carelessly, as he passes by; and as I answer 'No,' with a smile and shake of my head, he saunters off towards Lottie Hastings, with whom he commences a flirtation, calm but vigorous.

Somehow it is a peaceful hour we spend, and one that drives from me the vague irritation that before tormented me. In the quiet of the present I forget all life's vexations, and remember only such good things as are within my grasp. How paltry now seem the troubles that oppress me! I fear, yet know not what it is I fear. I doubt—yet, if compelled to do so, would find a difficulty in giving my doubt a name.

This sweeter mood continues and travels home with me, although we do not reach Strangemore until it is nearly nine.

Here, at an early supper, we all find ourselves in the wildest spirits. Glancing curiously at Dora, attracted by some nameless new expression in her eyes, I feel convinced the day has been to her one of unmixed triumph, and that already the Wishing Well has granted her desire.

As I get near her in the drawing-room I manage to whisper, 'What is it, Dora? Did he? Are you——'

‘Yes, he *did*, and I *am*,’ responds Dora, with a smile of unusual liveliness for her. ‘To-night you shall know all.’

‘How was it, Dora? How did it happen?’ I ask, two hours later, as I sit opposite to her, my hands embracing my knees, in my favourite position, my head bent forward in eager anticipation of her news.

‘I hardly know. It was all that Wishing Well, I fancy. For the future I shall feel it my duty to be superstitious. At all events, it surely helped to bring it about, as he only wanted the opportunity to declare himself,’ says Dora, complacently.

‘What did he say, Dora? Was he nervous—or——’

‘Very nervous. He seemed quite afraid to come to the point. You see I am always so distant in my manner,’ says my modest sister, ‘he had no way of judging what my answer was likely to be.’

‘I am sure whatever he said was just what it should be, he is so thoroughly sincere,’ I remark, still anxious to get at the root of the matter.

‘I am afraid I cannot altogether satisfy your curiosity, Phyllis, it has all got so mixed up. Of course he told me principally what I knew before: that he adored me, for instance, and was desirous of marrying me, and so forth. He was slightly incoherent, I thought; but it really signified very little whether his English was good or bad, so long as I managed to understand what he meant.’

‘Of course not, darling. Oh, Dora, I am so sorry we let mamma go without telling her!’

‘I did tell her, dear. At least—that is, he—George told her.’ She brings out the Christian name of her beloved with a charming amount of diffidence. ‘He said he would like to make sure of me; and indeed I thought myself—it might perhaps be as well—he should be the one to mention it to her—as a settled thing. You understand?’

I do, and begin to entertain rather an admiration for Dora's astuteness.

'You will forgive me now, Dora?' I say, suddenly, leaning over to put my hand on hers.

'Forgive you? Forgive what?'

'Well, dear, when I married 'Duke, you know, I thought you were rather vexed, you said so many things; and sometimes I have fancied since you still think I was in the wrong.'

'My dear Phyllis, what a curious girl you are! "Forgive you!" As if I had not done so ages and ages ago—if, indeed, there was anything to forgive. Surely you cannot have thought me so vindictive, so unchristian, as to retain bitter feelings against you all this time?'

She has opened her childish blue eyes to their widest, and is gazing at me plaintively, as though grieved I should imagine her capable of any vile feeling.

'I sometimes feared——' I stammer, utterly abashed in the presence of so much sweetness.

'You must put such ideas out of your head, Phyllis—they are very unworthy. I never harbour unforgiving thoughts, I should hope, towards anyone—least of all towards you, my sister. Besides, I ought really to be thankful to you, if anything. Marmaduke and I would have been most unsuited to each other. He is far too exigent and masterful for my taste—George is in every way more desirable.'

I don't quite see all this, but reserve my sentiments.

'He is greatly to be liked,' I say with truth—honest, good-natured George Ashurst having won his way into my affections long since. I don't know that I was ever more delighted about anything in my life.'

'Yes—everybody will be pleased, I imagine, papa and mamma especially. I don't see how papa can make the faintest objection in any way. He must feel gratified.'

I think of Sir George's rentroll, and have the words 'I should think so indeed' upon the tip of my tongue. But, being desirous of keeping up friendly relations with Dora, refrain from uttering them. She evidently takes her good fortune as a matter of course, having ever rated herself at a high price, and believes she has got her bare deserts—no more.

'I hope you—that is, I hope he will be very good to you,' I say, making the correction in time.

'I hope we shall be very good to each other. Indeed, I see nothing to prevent our being quite happy and—comfortable. Don't you think he appears very fond of me?'

'More than that—I think he appears to love you very dearly.'

'Yes, I really think he does,' says my sister, running her fingers lazily through her silky yellow hair.

'And you, Dora—do you love him?'

'Of course, dear. Would I marry him else? Am I the sort of person to sell myself for mere money's sake?' Indignation of the mild and virtuous order is in her tone. 'No,' says Dora, calmly looking me fair in the eyes, 'I would not marry a man unless I loved him—not if he had the mines of Golconda.'

This ennobling sentiment is, I feel, aimed at me, and justly judge it will be unwise to press the matter farther; so I say: 'I am so glad, darling!' but say it very weakly.

'Nevertheless,' goes on Dora, after a moment's pause, 'as I *do* love him it is very fortunate he should be so well off. Yesterday he told me he had 20,000*l.* a year. Rather more than you have, dear, is it not? sweetly.

No. Dora has not yet forgiven me.

'A great deal more,' I say warmly; 'we have only fifteen. But then, Dora, it was only to be expected you would make a far better match than I could.'

'Well—yes—perhaps so,' admits Dora, casting an

admiring glance at her own pretty shell-pink face as it smiles back at her from an opposite mirror.

The door opens and Marmaduke comes in.

'Oh, 'Duke!' I cry, rising, 'just fancy—Dora is — but you shall guess my news—what is she?'

'That is a rather embarrassing question,' says he, smiling. 'Were I to tell you all that Dora is in my eyes, we would get no sleep to-night.'

Dora laughs, and I say, 'Nonsense! A list of her perfections would be no news—we all know them. Tell me what you think has occurred to her since this morning.'

'I think she has become engaged to George Ashurst,' returns 'Duke, coolly. 'Why, you foolish child, do you call that news? Ashurst has told everyone in the house of his good luck by this time. If I were you, Dora, I would breakfast in my room to-morrow morning. You will never be able to stand all the congratulations.'

'How can he be so absurd!' murmurs Dora, for once in her life genuinely confused, a rich red colouring her cheeks.

'I congratulate you with all my heart,' says 'Duke, kindly, kissing her. 'You have got as good a husband as any girl could desire, and as rich a one, too, without doubt. We shall be small people, Phyllis, you and I, next to my Lady Ashurst.'

'I must not stay to hear any more flattery. Thank you very much for all you have said,' replies Dora, gracefully; and, having bidden us both good night, goes off to her own room.

Everyone in the house is immensely delighted. An engagement, even when everything belonging to it goes smoothly and suitably, cannot fail to awaken interest in the heart of a woman; and, Dora's lover being uncoveted by any of us, no jealousy shows itself to mar the universal good feeling.

We chatter about it all next day, and tell each

other we had seen how it would end from the very beginning. We dilate on the charming place he has in Surrey—his palace in the North; and then we whisper of what a detestable creature is his mother; while Bébé hopes Dora will have courage to put a veto at once against any lengthened visiting on her part.

‘Because,’ says Miss Beatoun, ‘we *all* know where *that* will lead. When Ashurst’s brother married Lady Octavia Dering his mother invited herself to pay them a month’s visit—and she stayed ten—and it was the doctor and the nurse eventually who insisted on putting her out, shortly after the boy was born. They say poor Lady Octavia nearly went out of her mind one morning, when, on going into her nursery, she found the old lady deliberately pouring some nauseous homœopathic medicine down the child’s throat. Octavia told me herself, with tears in her eyes, the poor little fellow was all but in a fit for two hours afterwards. She is really a very shocking old person, and should be suppressed. I do hope dear Dora will gather together all her pluck and try to be a match for her.’

Secretly I feel so assured of dear Dora’s being a ‘match’ for any mother-in-law alive that I endure no uneasy pangs on this count. She bears the congratulations and the little good-natured banterings admirably; is modest without being stupidly shy, and prettily conscious without betraying any symptoms of *gaucherie*. She is, indeed, as perfect in her new rôle of bride-elect as though she had sustained the part for years.

‘Sir George must be a favourite with the gods—let us hope he won’t die young,’ says Sir Mark, bending over Dora, some time during the evening. ‘He has had everything he could possibly desire from his cradle upwards—money, friends, position; and now he must get *you*. I think’—in a playfully injured tone—‘the good things of this life are very unequally divided. In common justice Ashurst should have been forced into matrimony with a woman as ugly, ill-tempered, and



altogether disenchanting as—his mamma, instead of which——’ He sighs audibly and makes an eloquent pause.

Dora smiles her usual soft, serene smile, untouched by coquetry—that experience has taught me means so little—and raises one white hand in deprecation. Dora’s hands are faultless—filbert-nailed, creamy-white, pink-tinged, with just sufficient blue tracery of the most delicate kind here and there to call attention to their beauty.

‘*Is* Lady Ashurst all that you say?—so *very* terrific? How unhappy you make me!’ she murmurs plaintively, demurely ignoring the other parts of his speech.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

FRESH and keen, and decidedly chilly, blows the October wind. The men have all deserted us and gone out shooting. The women are scattered through the house.

Crossing the hall and the smaller drawing-room, I meet no one; and, entering the larger apartment beyond, seek my favourite seat in the bow-window, where, book in hand, I ensconce myself behind the curtains, and, stretching myself upon a lounge, prepare to be lazily happy. The lace draperies falling round me entirely conceal me from view; I can see right into the conservatory without turning my head, and the seductive breath of flowers stealing towards me adds one more thrill to my enjoyment.

Steadily I turn page after page. I feel I am growing interested—a very little later I feel I am growing sleepy. My lids droop. Putting my book down upon my lap, with, of course, the settled intention of taking it up again directly, I yawn mildly.

The door opens; with a start I become aware of Bébé’s entrance. To admit I am present means con-

versation, and conversation with this drowsy fit upon me means misery. I therefore keep breathless silence, and Bébé, all unconscious, saunters past me, basket and scissors in hand, and goes into the conservatory.

I watch her dreamily as with a business-like air she drags the light garden-ladder forward and, mounting, commences to clip my very choicest blossoms for her own secret purposes.

One by one they fall into her basket. Has she no conscience? Or has she forgotten it is already October, and that flowers grow scarce? I confess to some faint indignation as I regard her, and have almost decided on rousing to remonstrate with her in person, when a firm but hasty footstep upon the gravel outside excites my curiosity.

A moment later Lord Chandos pushes open the door of the conservatory, and, entering, stops short, his gaze fixed upon Miss Beatoun.

As for Bébé, between looking suddenly round and surprise at his unexpected presence there, she loses all idea of balance, and is in the act of coming with undue hurry to the ground, when Lord Chandos, stepping quickly forward, catches her and lifts her lightly down. Perhaps he is a trifle longer in the performance of this deed than is strictly necessary.

‘Oh! how could you frighten one so?’ exclaims Bébé, colouring, and speaking ungratefully, as it seems to me, considering he has just saved her from a heavy fall. ‘I thought you were out shooting with the others.’

‘So I was; but—I forgot something, and had to return for it.’

‘What did you forget—your pipe?’

‘No, my gun,’ replies he, in the most barefaced fashion possible.

‘Oh!’ cries Miss Beatoun, lengthily, and then they both laugh.

‘Why don’t you admit at once you had no inten-

tion of shooting to-day? It would have been much honestest.'

'Because admissions are dangerous. It is always better policy to leave people in doubt. Yet, as I never class you in my own mind under the head of "people," I will confess to you it is not so much forgetfulness causes my presence here just now as a settled determination not to remember. My conscience was anything but clean when I said I had mislaid something, and should come back to find it.'

'Was it really your gun?'

'No; I think I put it on cartridges or a handkerchief or—I am not clear what.'

'And why? What was your motive? I fancied you an indefatigable sportsman—one impossible to turn aside from your prey.'

'Shall I tell you my motive?' asks Chandos, in such an utterly changed low tone that Miss Beatoun, standing near the ladder, lays her hand suddenly upon it to steady herself and retreats a step.

'Better not,' she says, in a voice that trembles apprehensively, in spite of all her efforts to be calm. 'Remember what you said a moment since: "Admissions are dangerous." Better leave me in doubt.'

'I cannot. Besides, you are not in doubt. You know what it is I am going to say. I have come back here again to-day to tell you how I have tried, and found it impossible, to crush the love I bear you.'

At this juncture I become aware I am in for a scene. The certainty is horrible to me. I am in such an unhappy position as enables me to see them without myself being seen. I can also hear every word they utter. In fact, there are but very few yards between us.

With shame I now recollect that Bébé once said of me that never would I be accused of 'pouncing' upon delicate situations; yet, if I go out now, I shall cover them both with everlasting confusion.

What shall I do? I put my fingers in my ears as a last resource and tightly close my eyes, but somehow they will not keep shut. Every now and then I cannot help glancing to see if they are gone or going; I cannot resist removing my fingers to hear if the conversation has taken a cooler turn.

Every moment I linger only makes my declaring myself more difficult. I end by giving in, and staring and listening with all my might.

Ah! why does Béb  look so determined? Why can't she yield gracefully and be happy? I would at once, were I in her place, and feel no degradation in so doing. She is flushed and miserable to look at, her large eyes seeming larger and darker than usual through pained excitement. Yet still there is so much mistaken pride impressed upon her features as makes me fear for the part she will take in the interview. If she would but listen to her heart's dictation!

'Lord Chandos, I implore you to desist,' entreats B   , hastily, raising one hand, to prevent his further speech. 'It is worse than useless.'

But he only imprisons the warning hand and continues: 'Nay, hear me—that is all I ask—and then, if I am again to be rejected, be it so. But surely I have been wretched long enough, and you——'

'I will not listen,' murmurs B   , more deeply agitated. 'The answer I gave you when you were poor is the only answer I can *ever* give you now.' Her voice dies away almost to a whisper.

'What do you mean by that?' exclaims Chandos, passionately. 'Is the very money that I hailed with delight, principally because I dreamed it might bring me closer to you, to prove a barrier between us? Presumptuous as it may sound, I dare to believe I am not quite indifferent to you. Your manner when we parted, your eyes when we met again down here, have fostered this belief, and yet you shrink from me.'

A little inarticulate cry escapes her. One hand

goes to her throat—she tries vainly to withdraw the other from his grasp.

‘Contradict me—if you can,’ he says, in a low but vehement tone.

‘This is ungenerous—unmanly,’ she falters, her words half-choked with emotion.

‘Contradict me,’ he reiterates.

‘I can—I do,’ murmurs she, but so weakly that her voice can scarcely be heard.

‘Is that the truth, Bébé?’ says Chandos, more quietly. ‘Is pride to come between us now? Darling, listen to me. If you for one moment imagine I think badly of you because you refused to marry a poor man you wrong me. I think you acted rightly. Even as I asked you that day I felt myself a coward in doing so. Was it honourable of me to seek to drag you down from all the luxuries and enjoyments to which you had been accustomed, to such a life as it was only in my power to offer? Had your answer been different do you believe we would have been happy? I do not.’

‘You strike at the very root of all romance,’ protests Bébé, with a rather sad smile.

‘I decline to countenance a great deal of rubbish,’ returns he, vigorously. ‘Poverty is the surest foe that love can have, I stoutly maintain, in spite of all the poets that ever wrote. But, now that it no longer stands in the way, Bébé, be my wife, and let us forget the past.’

‘Do you think we should either of us ever forget it?’ demands she, raising a small white mournful face to his. ‘Do you not see how it would come between us every hour of our lives? Even supposing what you say to be true, that I love you, it would be all the greater reason why I should now refuse to be persuaded into doing as you wish. Could I bear to know, day by day, that my husband thought me mercenary?’

‘Mercenary! I shall never think you that. How could I? How could any man blame you for shrinking

from such a selfish proposal as mine? I tell you again I think you behaved very rightly in the matter.'

'Very rightly, no doubt, and very wisely, and very prudently—for myself,' replies Bébé, in a cold, bitter way. 'Why seek to disguise the truth? If it be true what you have supposed, that I returned your affection, I only proved myself one of those who fear to endure even the smallest privation for the sake of him they love; and what a love that must be!' She laughs contemptuously. 'I fear, Lord Chandos, I am not of the stuff of which heroines are made.'

'If, as you hint, I am wrong,' exclaims Chandos, eagerly catching at a last chance, 'if all along I have been deceiving myself in the belief that you cared for me, let me begin again now, and at least try to obtain your affection. If when——'

'Enough has been said,' interrupts she, icily; 'too much. Let my hand go, Lord Chandos. I want to find Mrs. Carrington.'

(Mrs. Carrington is almost on the verge of lunacy by this time between fright and disappointment.)

'Is there, then, no hope?' asks Chandos, sternly. 'Am I to understand that you again reject me?'

'Yes, as you put it in that light. It is your own fault,' bursts out Bébé, passionately. 'I told you not to speak.'

'Had all the world told me the same thing I would still have spoken. Death itself is preferable to suspense. If my persistence has caused you any annoyance, Miss Beatoun, I beg you will forgive me.'

'I too would be forgiven,' falters Bébé, putting out a cold white hand. As he stoops to kiss it she goes on faintly: 'Will you promise me to forget you ever cared for me in—this way?'

'Impossible,' returns he, abruptly, and, turning, walks out of the conservatory through the door by which he entered.

'Now, is it not provoking? I feel my heart

touched with pity for Lord Chandos, with resentment towards his cruel love, until, glancing towards the latter, who has stood motionless since his departure, with head bent and hands loosely clasped, the resentment fades and compassion of the deepest takes its place.

I would give all the world to be able to go meet and comfort her, to twine my arms around her neck, to express my sympathy. But how can I? What a treacherous creature she would think me! How mean! nothing but a pitiful eavesdropper.

Slowly she raises her head, and, breathing a heavy sigh, advances until she stands within the drawing-room.

She is awfully close to me now; I can almost touch her. How on earth am I to meet her again with this secret on my mind? If I go on feeling as I do now I shall betray myself a thousand times within an hour.

Two large tears gather in her eyes and roll mournfully downwards.

I can bear it no longer. Whatever comes of it, I must make my presence known, and, springing from my couch, I dash aside the thick lace curtains and reveal myself.

Uttering a sharp cry, she recedes a little, then checks herself to stare at me with mingled haughtiness and astonishment.

‘Yes, I was here all the time,’ I cry, imploringly, ‘and I heard every word. I was lying on this sofa, and nothing escaped me. Of course you will never forgive me for it, but indeed I did not mean to listen.’

‘Oh, Phyllis!’

There is such a world of reproach in her tone that I become distracted. I move towards her and break into speech of the most incoherent description, my words falling from me with the rapidity of desperation.

‘Yes, it is true,’ I say. ‘You may look at me as if you hated me, but what was I to do? When first

you came in I was in a dozy, half sleepy sort of state, and not until you and Chandos were in the very middle of your discussion did I fully awake to the horrors of my situation. Had I declared myself then it surely would have been worse; and besides, I hoped, I believed you would have been kind to him at the end, and dreaded lest my unexpected appearance should put a stop to his proposal. However'—pathetically—'I suppose you will never forgive me.'

'Oh, Phyllis, it is all over now,' is poor Bébé's unlooked-for reply as she throws herself into my arms, with a burst of grief. She is forgetful of all but her trouble. How paltry a thing in comparison with it is my small misdemeanour!

'No, no,' I reply, soothingly, patting the back of her neck, which is all I can get at. 'Remember the very last thing he said, that it would be "impossible" to forget you.'

'Ah! so he said. But when he has time to reflect he will see how cold and detestable were my words. He will be glad of his escape from anyone so unloving. I myself wonder now, Phyllis, how I could have so spoken to him.'

'I could have killed you as I listened,' I say, vindictively. 'How you brought yourself to behave so badly to the dear fellow is more than I can understand. And he looked so nice all the time, and was so delightfully in earnest! Oh, I know I would have given in long before he had time to say one-half what he said to you. Bébé, what made you so cold? I could have gone in and shaken you with all my heart.'

'I wish you had,' replies she, dolefully. 'Yet perhaps things are better as they are. At all events, he cannot think meanly of me. I have shown him that, whatever else I may be, I am not a mere money-lover.'

'Well, for all that I think it a foolish thing to cut off one's nose to vex one's face,' return I, with much truth and more vulgarity.



‘I am not vexing anyone,’ says Bébé.

‘Yes, you are. You meant to vex Lord Chandos, and you succeeded. And you are vexing yourself dreadfully. And all for what? For that miserable thing called pride. Now, I never had any of that troublesome commodity about me, and I believe the want of it adds greatly to one’s enjoyment.’

Had I accepted him I would have been wretched,’ murmurs she, with a sigh. Then, breaking down again: ‘And now that I have refused him I am wretched too; so there is no comfort anywhere.’

‘I shall always for the future hate that conservatory,’ exclaim I, half-crying. ‘And what was the use of my wishing at the Deacon’s Well if this is the only answer I am to receive?’

‘Was your wish about me?’

‘Yes. I hoped Lord Chandos would again ask you to marry him. And see, it has happened. I forgot to wish at the same moment that you might be endowed with a little common sense. It never occurred to me that you would be rash enough to murder your happiness a second time.’

‘What a good little thing you are, Phyllis, to think about it at all! Well, let us not speak of it again to-day. I do not choose he shall see me with reddened lids, like a penitent. And if I cry any more I shall have to borrow some rouge from the blooming Going to colour my pale cheeks. See, I still can laugh!’

‘You will marry him yet,’ retort I, with conviction, refusing to notice the negative shake of the head she bestows upon me as she quits the room.

## CHAPTER XXV.

‘HARRIET, I am freezing rapidly; will you ring the bell, as you are so near it, and let us get some more coals? Tynon seems to think we require none.’

Harriet withdraws her hand reluctantly from where it is lying, warm and perdu, beneath the silky Skye snoozing on her lap and does as she is bidden.

It *is* terribly cold. Suddenly, and without the usual gentle warning, winter has come upon us. We sit shivering around the fire, and abuse unceasingly the roaring logs because they won't roar faster.

Already my guests talk of leaving; already countless invitations to spend the coming Christmas in the homes of others have reached Marmaduke and me. Indeed, Harriet and Béb —whose mother does not return to England until the coming spring—will take no refusal.

Dora's marriage is arranged to come off about the middle of the ensuing month; and even now the illustrious personage who deigned to make me presentable on my entrance into fashionable life is busying herself about the *trousseau*. It seems to me a dreary month in which to celebrate a wedding, but Sir George and Dora do not see it in this light, and talk gaily of all the delights to be culled from a winter in Rome.

'Where is Lady Blanche?' I ask, suddenly awakening to the fact that for some hours I have not seen her.

'She complained of a headache shortly after the departure of the shooting party,' says Dora, who is as usual tatting, 'and went to her own room.'

'Dear me! I hope it is nothing serious,' I say, anxiously, my conscience accusing me of some slight neglect. 'I thought she did look rather pale when I met her in the hall.'

'I don't think you need be uneasy, dear,' remarks Harriet, mildly, with a suspicious twinkle in her eyes; 'Blanche's headaches *never* come to anything. Probably she will be quite herself again by dinner-time.'

'Perhaps she felt a little dull—when the gentle-

men were gone,' suggests dear Dora, *very* innocently, without raising her white lids.

Harriet laughs maliciously, and pulls her Skye's ears, and thus encouraged our gentle Dora smiles.

'It seems rude, though, not to inquire for her—does it not?' say I, with hesitation. 'I think I will just run up and ask if there is nothing that I can do for her.'

So saying I put down my work—a wonderful piece of imagination in the shape of a beaded collar for Tito, Bébé's fox-terrier—which ever since its arrival has evinced a decided preference for me beyond its mistress—and going upstairs knock at the door of the 'round' room that Blanche occupies.

'Come in,' returns her ladyship's voice, carelessly, evidently thinking she is addressing one of the domestics.

I turn the handle and enter.

At the farther end of the room, robed in a pale blue dressing-gown, richly trimmed with lace, sits Blanche—looking by no means so ill as I had expected to see her. Indeed, the clearness of her eyes and the general air of liveliness about her agree badly with her tale of a headache.

She has before her a tiny writing table, and in her hand a very elaborate pink sheet of note-paper heavily monogrammed. It is covered with close writing, and as I open the door she is in the act of folding it. As her eyes meet mine, however, with a sudden want of presence of mind—scarcely worthy of her—she hesitates, and finally ends by putting it hastily between the leaves of her blotter.

She has flushed slightly, and looks put out. Altogether, I cannot help seeing my visit is as ill-timed as it is unwelcome.

She rises to meet me, and in doing so throws a goodly amount of elegant languor into her face and form.

‘I was so sorry to hear of your not feeling well,’ I hasten to say, as sympathetically as I can. ‘I came to see if I could do anything for you.’

‘So good of you’—with a weary smile—‘so kind to take all this trouble! But, thank you, no. I am a perfect martyr to these attacks, and I find when seized with one that rest and entire freedom from conversation are my only cures. I have such a wretched head,’ putting her hand pathetically to her forehead. ‘At such times as these I am utterly useless and the worst companion possible.’

‘A headache must be a miserable thing,’ say I, thinking all the while how uncommonly well she bears hers.

‘Yes,’ resignedly. ‘You never have one, I suppose?’

‘Oh, never; I hardly know what it means—the sensation you speak of. I am so desperately healthy, you see. I daresay it comes from living in the country all my life and never keeping late hours. Perhaps’—smiling—‘when I get to London I shall learn all too soon.’

‘I hope not, for your own sake.’

‘I fear you will be terribly *ennuyée* up here all by yourself. If you would come down to the library it would be so much more cheerful for you. There is a good lounge there; and you need not talk unless you wish it.’

‘Thank you very much, but indeed I am better where I am. I hate inflicting myself upon my friends when I am so hopelessly out of spirits. Perhaps by and by—towards evening—I shall lose this feeling of heaviness. I generally do, indeed, if I remain perfectly quiet during the day. Until then, dear Mrs. Carrington, I must ask you to excuse me. But’—going back to her own seat, withdrawing the coquettish little note from its concealment, and proceeding to

fold it into a cocked-hat with elaborate openness—  
‘will you not sit down for a few minutes?’

I accept the hint.

‘No indeed. I will leave you to get a little sleep, so that we may be the more sure of seeing you amongst us this evening.’

Much pleased with this speech, which sounds to my own ears particularly graceful, I move towards the door and vanish.

‘Well, how is she?’ asks Béb , coming upon me unexpectedly, and speaking in a suppressed and agitated tone, as though some one were dead or dying in the next room. ‘Is she anything better, poor darling? Does the doctor hold out the faintest chance of her recovery? Speak, and relieve my burning anxiety.’

‘I don’t believe she is ill at all,’ I return in high disgust. ‘She looks perfectly well, and her colour quite as bright as ever.’

‘A hectic flush, dearest. I fear our sweet friend is in a bad way. How could you look at her without seeing the ravages of disease? Dear Phyllis, I doubt you are sadly wanting in discernment. What did our “stricken deer” say to you?’

‘Oh, she put on an affected drawl and called herself a wretched being, and pressed her forehead tragically, and was meekly resigned in every way, and looked most provokingly healthy all the time. I know I was not half as sympathetic as I ought to have been.’

B b  breaks into merry laughter. We have turned a corner, and are on our way downstairs by this. ‘Look here, Phyllis,’ cries she: ‘you may take my word for it the fair Blanche is this moment in as sound health as you or I.’

‘But why, then, immure herself in her room and act the martyr?’

‘Tired of our company probably, dear. We all understand Blanche’s vapours by this. The men have gone out, you see, not to return until dinner-hour, and

women are so terribly insipid. My lady's dresses want renovating, it may be, and surely this is a capital opportunity to see to them. *Voilà tout.*'

'And could she not say so? Why tell a lie about such a trifle?'

'Blanche has a talent for lying. A pity to let it run altogether to waste, is it not? She enjoys a little mystery now and then; and besides, she would die of chagrin if she thought we knew she ever spent an hour upon the *doing up* of her things. We all have our "little weaknesses,"' says Miss Beatoun, comically, as we enter the drawing-room.

Somehow the remembrance of that pink note and the faint confusion exhibited by Blanche Going on my entrance into her room lingers in my mind. I feel a vague dislike to that monogrammed epistle. For whom was it meant?

Off and on during the remainder of the day this question haunts me, and only a supreme effort of the will prevents my connecting with it the name of 'Marmaduke.'

Surely, surely I cannot be becoming that most detestable of all things, a jealous, suspicious wife!

I am unhappy and restless in spite of all my endeavours to be otherwise. I wander through the house conversing with feverish gaiety with anyone I chance to meet—longing eagerly, I scarcely know why, for the return of the sportsmen. Yet, as the twilight falls and the shades of evening gather, instead of waiting for their coming I leave Dora in full possession of the tea-tray, and, quitting the drawing-room, go upstairs to pass a solitary and purposeless hour in my boudoir—the pretty little sanctum, all blue and silver, that associations have endeared to me.

Finding myself as restless here, however, as elsewhere, I leave it as the clock chimes half-past six, and, turning into the picture-gallery, begin to stare stupidly enough upon the grim cavaliers and im-

modest shepherdesses, who in their turn stare back at me.

Suddenly I become conscious that some cold air is blowing upon me, and raising my eyes perceive the lower window to be partly open. I shiver, and involuntarily move forward to close it. Outside this window runs a balcony, reached by stone steps from the ground beneath, and as I draw nearer to it sounds coming from thence fall upon my ears—first a woman's voice, and then a man's.

Their words, though softly uttered, are thoroughly distinct—a fragment of their conversation, unchecked by the chill wind, passes close by me and makes itself heard.

‘So *you* thought *once*. You cannot yet have altogether forgotten the old times—the past memories——’

It is Blanche Going's voice, and the accent strikes me as being reproachfully, nay, *tenderly* impassioned.

For a moment my heart stops beating. A cold dampness covers my face. I *cannot* move. I hardly dare to breathe. Oh! to whom are those words addressed? *Whose* voice will give her back an answer?

Sir Mark speaks; and, with a relief that through its intensity is for the instant acutest pain, I stagger against the wall near me and stand motionless to recover calm.

‘Can anything be more melancholy than “old times”?’ murmurs Sir Mark, lightly, without the faintest trace of tenderness in his tone. ‘Believe me we can have no real happiness in this life, until we have learned successfully how to forget.’

I leave the window noiselessly, but as I go the words and their meaning follow me. ‘Old times’—‘past memories’—can it indeed be that in the ‘long ago’ lie love passages that once were fresh between Lady Blanche and Sir Mark Gore?

*If* it be so, and that the remembrance of them is not yet quite dead in *her* heart, what becomes of my theory (that of late has been a settled conviction) that she bears an overweening affection for my husband? Surely her tone was utterly sincere: she had not feigned that despairing sadness—those few words had come from a full heart—from a woman making a last vain effort to revive a buried love.

I gain my own room, and having locked the outside door, stop to press my hand to my forehead. A sensation that is partly triumph, partly joy, rises within me—joy, however, that lasts but for a moment, as, with a groan, I recollect how as yet I have not proved Marmaduke's indifference to *her*.

Of what consequence is it to me to know whether Marmaduke is or is not the first in Blanche Going's thoughts, unless I be assured that *she* is not the first in *his*?

Nevertheless, in spite of these dismal doubts, I feel my spirits somewhat lighter. My feelings towards my husband take a kindlier shade as I hurry through my dressing with the assistance of my maid—being already rather late with my toilette. I hear 'Duke enter his own room. The days are long gone by when he would seek my presence the first thing on his return, and, having given me the kind and tender kiss I prized so little, proceed to tell me all that the day had brought him.

Just now this thought forces itself upon me obstinately, bringing a strange, remorseful pang to my heart. I dismiss Martha, and in an unusually softened frame of mind open the door that separates his room from mine and say, cheerfully, 'Had you good sport, Marmaduke?'

He looks up plainly surprised, but makes no comment on my unexpected appearance.

'Pretty fair. Not so good as we hoped on setting



out, but very respectable for all that. Thornton is a first-class shot. Anyone here to-day?’

‘Yes, the De Veres and Murrays. But they stayed no time, and old Mrs. Murray was in a very bad temper. It appears Harry is more than ever determined about marrying the governess.’

‘I pity the governess if she goes back to live with the old lady as daughter-in-law.’

‘So do I. Oh, Marmaduke, have you got any eau de Cologne? Martha must have a weakness for it, as she never leaves me any.’

‘I see plenty in one of these bottles. Come and take it.’

I walk in, fastening my bracelet as I go.

‘That’s a pretty dress you have on to-night,’ says Marmaduke, regarding me critically before going in for a second battle with a refractory tie—already three lie in the corner slaughtered.’

‘Fancy *your* seeing anything about me worth admiring!’ I reply; but in spite of my words my laugh is low and pleased. His tone, though quiet, has a ring of cordiality in it that for some time has been absent. A smile hovers round my lips; I lift my head and am about to make some little, trifling, saucy, honeyed speech, when my eyes fall upon a certain object, that lies upon the toilette-table amongst the numerous other things he has just withdrawn from his pockets.

A tiny pale-pink three-cornered note rests, address uppermost, beneath my gaze. ‘Marmaduke Carrington, Esq.’—no more. How well I know it, the delectable, clear, beautiful writing!

I feel my lips compress, my cheeks grow ashy white. Turning abruptly, stung to the quick, I leave the room. ‘Will you not take the bottle with you?’ calls out Marmaduke; and I answer, in rather a stifled voice, ‘No, thank you,’ and shut the door between us hastily.

Oh, that *that* was all that separated us? I feel half-mad with outraged pride and passion. That she should write him *billet-doux* in my own house, that *he* should receive them and treasure them, seems to me, in my excited state, the very basest treachery. Making fierce love beneath my very eyes, so careless of my feelings, or so convinced of my stupidity, as to take no pains to conceal their double-dealing!

I grow almost reckless, and remember with some sort of satisfaction that at least it is in my power to wound him in turn—and her, too, after what I have overheard this evening. Although his vaunted love for me—if ever there—is now gone, I can still touch him where his honour is concerned. I rub my pale face until the colour returns to it, I bite my quivering lips until they gleam like crimson berries, and, going downstairs, for the first time in my life I let the demon of coquetry rise and hold full sway within my breast while I go in for an open and decided flirtation with Sir Mark Gore.

Yet how miserable I am! How wretched are the moments, when I give myself room for thought! I note Marmaduke's dark frown, as, with flushed cheeks and gleaming, sparkling eyes, I encourage and reply gaily to Sir Mark's nonsense. I see Bébé's surprised glance and Harriet's pained one. I watch with exultation the bitter expression that clouds Lady Blanche's brow. I see everything around me, and long—with a feverish longing—for the evening to wear to an end.

At length comes the welcome hour of release. We have all wished each other 'Good-night.' The men have retired to their smoking-room, the women to their bedroom fires and the services of their maids.

Martha having pulled my hair to pieces and brushed it vigorously, I give her leave to seek her own couch, and, with a set purpose in my mind, get through the remainder of my night-toilette without assistance.

An unrestrainable craving to learn all the par-

ticulars of Marmaduke's former attachment to Lady Blanche Going (as described by Mark Gore) seizes me; and Bébé being of all people the one most likely to satisfy my curiosity, I determine to seek her and gain from her what knowledge I can. She is, besides, the only one of whom I would make such an inquiry; therefore to her room I prepare to go.

I hastily draw on a pale blue cashmere dressing-gown, prettily trimmed with satin quilting of the same shade, and substitute blue slippers for the black ones I have been wearing during the evening. My hair hangs in rich chestnut masses far below my waist; two or three stray rippling locks wander wantonly across my forehead. A heavy blue cord and tassel, confining my gown, completes my costume.

Leaving my own room noiselessly, I reach Bébé's, and knock softly at the door.

She too has dismissed her maid, and is sitting before the fire in an attitude that bespeaks reverie; whatever her thoughts, however, she puts them from her on my entrance and comes forward to greet me, the gay, bright *débonnaire* Bébé of every day.

'I am so glad you have come!' she says, running to take both my hands and lead me to the fire. 'A few minutes' conversation at this hour of the night are worth *hours* of the day. And, oh, Phyllis, how pretty you look!'

'Nonsense!' return I, mightily pleased nevertheless; and, going over to the cheval glass, I proceed to examine myself with a critical eye.

'*Wonderfully* pretty,' repeats Bébé, with emphasis. 'My dearest Phyllis, you should *always* wear blue cashmere, and let your hair fall down your back just so. You look exactly fourteen and very charming.'

'Well even at the best of times I was never considered pretty,' declare I, modestly. 'Now and then, when wearing a new dress or that, I may have appeared

good-looking, but even Marmaduke never told me I was *that*.'

'Never told you you were *pretty*!' cries Bébé, in a voice of horror. 'Never told you you were the sweetest and loveliest creature upon earth? What a *miserable* lover!' It would be impossible to describe the amount of scorn she throws into her manner.

Her words, though I know they are spoken in jest, coming thus hotly on my new suspicions, rankle sorely.

'I don't see that his telling me a lie would have done any good,' I expostulate, somewhat warmly, feeling passionately aggrieved at the thought that he has fallen short in his wooing. Surely once, if for ever so little a time, I was all in all to him.

'Yes, it would—an immensity of good. It would be only fit and proper. That is just one of the things about which a man ought to be able to lie *well*; though, indeed, in most cases I doubt if it *would* be a lie. Change a friend into a lover, awaken within him the desire to make you his wife, and, such is the vanity and the self-complacency of man, he will at once (in regarding you as *his* possible property) magnify your charms, and end by contrasting you favourably with every other wife of his acquaintance. *You* do not come within the pale of my remarks, however, as I speak of ugly women. Phyllis, you are too modest. You give me the impression that all your life through you have been more or less sat upon. Is it not so?'

'I believe it is,' I answer, laughing; 'but I think justly so. Why, only look at my nose: it turns right up; and—and then, you know, Dora was always on the spot to eclipse me.'

'Indeed I know nothing of the kind. *You* are infinitely more attractive in my eyes; though I admit Dora has charms, with her complexion and eyes of "holy blue." I verily believe you are a hypocrite.

Don't you *know* all the men here rave about you? Don't you know it was a fixed creed in the family that Marmaduke's heart was cased in steel until he destroyed it by marrying you?'

'Oh,' I say, with a light laugh, though my blood is coursing wildly through my veins, 'you exaggerate slightly there, I think. Was he not very much *épris* with his cousin, Lady Blanche Going, some years ago?'

'A mere boy and girl attachment. I would as soon dream of lending importance to the passion of a school-boy in his teens—to the passion of my dear Chips, for instance. Besides, she was several years older than he was—whatever she may be now,' says Bébé, with a little grimace.

'Was it violent while it lasted?'

'I don't remember anything about it; but mamma says it died a natural death after one season. Then she married Colonel Going.'

'Why does Colonel Going remain away so long?'

'Ah! why, indeed, my dear—that is a thing nobody knows. There was no divorce, no formal separation, no *esclandre* of any kind; he merely put the seas between them, and is evidently determined on keeping them there. To me and my cousins of my own age the colonel is something of a myth; but mamma knew him well about six years ago, and says he was a very fascinating man, and upright, but rather stern.'

'What a curiously unpleasant story! But didn't people talk?'

'Of course they did; they did even worse—they whispered; but her ladyship took no notice, and everyone had to confess she behaved beautifully on the occasion. She gave out that her extreme delicacy alone (her constitution is of iron) prevented her accompanying him to India, and she withdrew from society, in the very height of the season, for two whole months. Surely decorum could no further go!'

'And then?'

‘Why, then she reappeared, with her beauty much augmented from the enforced quiet and early hours—and with her mother.’

‘What is the mother like? One can hardly fancy Blanche with anything so tender as a mother.’

‘Like a fairy godmother, minus the magic wand and the energy of that famous person. A little old lady with a dark face, and eyes that would be keen and searching but for the discipline she has undergone. She has no opinions and no aims but what are her daughter’s; and Blanche rules *her*—as she rules every other member of her household—with a rod of iron.’

‘Poor old creature! What an unhappy age! So you say Marmaduke’s admiration for Blanche meant nothing? And she—did *she* like *him*?’

‘For “like” read “love,” I suppose? My dearest Phyllis, have you, who have been so long under the same roof with Blanche, yet to discover how impossible it would be for her to love anyone but Blanche Going? Yet stay—I wrong her partly—*once* she *did* love, and does so still, I believe.’

‘Whom do you mean?’ ask I, bending forward eagerly.

‘Have you no notion? How surprised you look! You will wonder still more when I tell you the hero of her romance is at present in your house.’

‘Here, in *this* house!’ I stammer.

‘Yes. No less a person than Mark Gore.’

So I am right. And jealousy has been at the root of all her ladyship’s open hostility towards me!

‘Any casual observer would never think so,’ I remark, at last, after a very lengthened pause.

‘That is because Mark’s infatuation has come to an end, and he does not care to renew matters. If you watch him you may see what particular pains he takes to avoid a *tête-à-tête* with her. And yet there certainly was a time when she had considerable influence over him. He was a constant visitor at her house in town

—so constant, that at length it began to be mooted about how he had the *entrée* there at all hours and seasons, even when an intimate lady friend might expect a denial. Then people began to whisper again and shake their wise heads and pity “that poor colonel,” and watch eagerly for the *dénouement*.’

‘Why did her mother not interfere?’

‘My dear, have I not already told you what a perfectly drilled old lady is the mother? It would be as much as her life is worth to interfere in any of her daughter’s arrangements. She is utterly dependent on Blanche, and, therefore, perforce a nonentity. She is expected to remain in the house as a useful piece of furniture; and she is also expected to have neither ears nor eyes nor tongue. Besides, it was not a singular case: Mark was only the last on a long list of admirers. My lady could not exist without a *cavalier servant*.’

‘I think it downright abominable,’ say I, with much warmth.

Bébé looks amused.

‘So do I. But what will you? And in spite of all our thoughts Mark came and went unceasingly. Wherever madame appeared so did her shadow—at every ball he was in close attendance, until, the season dragging to a close, Blanche went abroad for two or three months, and Mark went down to this part of the world. To ’Duke was it?’

‘No; if you mean the summer before last, he stayed with the Leslies,’ I admit, somewhat unwillingly. ‘I met him several times.’

‘What! you knew him, then, before your marriage?’ cries Bébé, with surprise.

‘Very slightly. Once or twice he called with the Leslies, and when he returned to town he sent me an exquisite little volume of Tennyson; which delicate attention on his part so enraged papa that he put my book in the fire and forbade my writing to thank Sir Mark for it. So ended our acquaintance.’

‘Oh, *now* I have the secret; *now* I understand why Blanche detests you so,’ exclaims Bébé, clapping her hands merrily. ‘So he lost his heart to you, did he? And madame heard all about it, and was rightly furious? Oh, how she must have ground her pretty white teeth in impotent rage on discovering how she was outdone by a simple village maiden! I vow it is a tale that Offenbach’s music might adorn.’

‘How absurd you are, Bébé! How you jump to conclusions! I assure you Sir Mark left our neighbourhood as heart-whole as when he came to it.’

‘Well, I won’t dispute the point; but, whether it was your fault or not, when Blanche and he again met all was changed. His love had flown no one knew whither. He still continued to pay her visits, it is true, but not every day and all day long. He still attended the balls to which she went, but *not* as her slave. Blanche fretted and fumed herself thin at his defection; but it was no use—the spell was broken, and Mark was not to be recalled. You will think me a terrible scandalmonger,’ says Bébé, with a smile, ‘but when one hears a thing perpetually discussed one feels an interest in it at last in spite of oneself. You look shocked, Phyllis. I suppose there is no such thing in this quiet county as polite crime?’

‘I don’t know about the politeness, but of course there is plenty of crime. For instance, last assizes Bill Grimes, our gardener’s son at Summerleas, was transported for poaching; and eight months ago John Haddon, the blacksmith, fired at his landlord; and it is a well-known fact that Mr. De Vere beats his wife dreadfully every now and then; but there are no such stories as the one you have just told to me. I think it disgraceful. What is the use of it all? How can it end?’

‘Sometimes in an elopement; sometimes, as in Blanche’s case, in nothing. You must understand she is perfectly respectable, and that the very nicest people



receive her with open arms. But then none of them would be in the least surprised if any morning she was missing. And, indeed, sometimes I wish she *would* like somebody well enough to quit the country with him. Anything would be decenter than these perpetual intrigues.'

'Oh, no, Bébé; nothing could be so bad as that. Little as I care for her, I hope I shall never hear such evil tidings of her.'

'Phyllis, you are a dear charitable child, and I like you—it would be impossible for me to say how much. Do you know'—putting her hand on mine—'I have always sneered at the idea of any really sincere attachment existing between women? But since I have known you I have recanted and confessed myself in error. If you were my sister I could not love you better.'

Contrasting her secretly with meek-eyed Dora, I feel guiltily that to me Bébé is the more congenial of the two. With my natural impulsiveness I throw my arms round her neck and favour her with a warm kiss.

'But I am not charitable,' goes on Bébé when she has returned my chaste salute, 'and I detest Blanche with all my heart. There is something so sly and sneaking about her. She would do one an injury, if it suited her, even while accepting a kindness at one's hands. Do you know, Phyllis, she is still madly in love with Sir Mark, while I think *he* is decidedly smitten with you?'

My face and throat grow scarlet.

'I hope not,' I stammer foolishly.

'I am sure of it. He never takes his eyes off you, and at times my lady is absolutely wild. I never noticed it so plainly as this evening; and by the by, *ma mie*'—very gently and kindly—'I confess it occurred to me—were you flirting with Mark—just a little?'

‘I don’t know what came over me this evening,’ I reply, petulantly; ‘I hardly know what I said or did. Something was on my mind and made my actions false. I don’t care a bit for Mark Gore, but still I let it seem as if I did.’

‘Don’t make yourself unhappy by imagining absurdities,’ says Bébé, quietly, *à propos* of nothing that I could see, and without looking at me; ‘and take care of Blanche—she would make a dangerous enemy. Not that I think she could harm you; but sometimes her soft eyes betray her, and she looks as if she could cheerfully stab you. To me it is a little comedy, and I enjoy it immensely. I can see she would do anything to bring back Mark to his allegiance, and for that purpose makes love to Marmaduke before his eyes, in the vain hope of rendering him jealous. And’—with a swift, shrewd glance at me—‘what can poor ’Duke do but pretend to accept her advances and be civil to her?’

I think of the pink billet and of all the other trifles light as air that go far to make me believe the pretence to be a pleasant one for ’Duke, but say nothing. He certainly finds it more than easy to be ‘civil’ to her.

‘However, *her* pains go for naught,’ continues Bébé; ‘there is nothing so difficult to re-light as a dead love.’

A shadow crosses her *piquante* face. She draws in her lips and bravely smothers a sigh. A door bangs loudly in the distance.

I start to my feet.

‘It must be later than I thought,’ I say. ‘The men seem to have tired of their cigars. Good-night, dear Bébé.’

‘Good night,’ she murmurs, and with a hurried embrace we part.

I gain the corridor, down one long side of which I must pass to get to my own room. Fancying, when

half-way, that I hear a noise behind me, I stop to glance back and ascertain the cause; but no capped or frisette head pushes itself out of any door to mark my doings. Some one of the indescribable noises belonging to the night has misled me.

Reassured, I turn again—to find myself face to face with Mark Gore.

He is three yards distant from me. His face wears a surprised and somewhat amused expression, that quickly changes to one deeper, as his eyes travel all over my pretty gown, my slippers, and my disordered hair.

Naturally I am covered with confusion; and having had time to feel ashamed of my behaviour during the evening, feel how specially unfortunate is this encounter.

‘Do you often indulge in midnight rambles?’ he asks, gaily, stopping in front of me.

‘No,’ I return, as unconcerned as I well can, considering my perturbation; ‘but to-night Miss Beatoun and I found so much to say about our friends that we forgot the hour. Don’t let me detain you, Sir Mark. Good night.’

‘Good night,’ holding out his hand, into which I am constrained to put mine. As I make a movement to go on he detains me for a moment to say quietly, ‘I never saw you before with your hair down. You make one lose faith in coiffeurs. And why do you not oftener wear blue?’

There is not the faintest shadow of disrespect in his tone—he speaks as though merely seeking information; and, though the flattery is openly apparent, it is not of a sort calculated to offend. Still I feel irritated and impatient.

‘Fancy anyone appearing perpetually robed in the same hue!’ I say, snubbily; ‘like the “Woman in White” or the “dark girl dressed in blue!”’

‘You remind me of Buchanan’s words,’ goes on Sir

Mark, not taking the slightest notice of my tone.  
Do you remember them?—

*My hair was golden yellow, and it floated to my shoe;  
My eyes were like two harebells bathed in little drops of dew.'*

'*My hair golden yellow!*' exclaim I, ungraciously.  
'Who could call it so? It is distinctly brown. I cannot say you strike me as being particularly happy in the suitability of your quotations.'

All this time he has not let go of my hand. He has either forgotten to do so or else it pleases him to retain it; and, as we have moved several steps apart and are at least half a yard asunder, our position would suggest to a casual observer that Sir Mark is endeavouring to keep me.

Raising my head suddenly at this juncture, I see Marmaduke coming slowly up the stairs. Our eyes meet; I blush scarlet, and, with my usual clear common sense, drag my hand in a marked and guilty manner out of my companion's. Once more I stammer 'Good night' very awkwardly, and make a dart towards my own room, while Sir Mark, totally unaware of the real cause of my confusion, goes on his way, conceitedly convinced that the fascination of his manner has alone been sufficient to bring the colour to my brow.

Inside my door I literally stamp my feet with vexation. 'Could anything be more provoking? What a nuisance that Sir Mark is, with his meaningless compliments! I have no patience with men, who are for ever cropping up just when they are least wanted.'

'Do you know how late it is?' says Marmaduke, coming in from his dressing-room, with an ominous frown in his blue eyes.

'Yes; I was thinking what a scandalously late hour it is for you to be still up smoking,' I retort, determined to fight it out, and meanly trying to make my own cause better by throwing some blame on him.

‘I thought you in bed at least an hour ago.’

‘Well, you thought wrong. I had something particular to say to Bébé, and went to her room. That delayed me. We neither of us guessed how the time had run away until we heard the study-door close, or the smoking-room, or wherever you were. Coming out I met Sir Mark accidentally.’

Though my tone is defiant I still feel I am excusing myself, and this does not sweeten my temper.

‘Oh!’ says Marmaduke, drily.

‘Why do you speak in that tone, Marmaduke?’

‘I am not aware I am using any particular tone. But I admit I most strongly object to your going up and down the corridors at this hour of night in your dressing-gown.’

‘You mean you disapprove of my meeting Sir Mark Gore. I could not help that. It happened unfortunately, I allow; but when the man stopped me to bid me a civil “Good night” I could not bring myself to pass him as though he were an assassin or a midnight marauder. Of course I answered him politely. I can see nothing improper in that, to make you scowl as you are scowling now.’

‘I am not talking of impropriety,’ says ‘Duke, very haughtily. ‘It is *impossible* I should connect such a word with *your* conduct. Were I obliged to do so the same roof would not cover us both for half an hour longer—be assured of that.’

I laugh wickedly.

‘Which of us would go?’ I ask. ‘Would you turn me out? Wait a little longer, until the frost and snow are on the ground: *then* you can do it with effect. The tale would be wanting in interest unless I perished before morning in a snow-drift. And all because I crossed a corridor at midnight in a blue dressing-gown! Poor gown! who would guess that there was so much mischief in you? Sir Mark said it was a very pretty dressing-gown.’

I sink my hands in the pockets of the luckless gown and look up at 'Duke with a 'now, then!' expression on my face. He is as black as night with rage. Standing opposite to him, even in my high-heeled shoes, I want quite an inch of being as tall as his shoulder, yet I defy him as coolly as though he were the pigmy and I the giant.

'I don't in the least want to know what Gore said or did not say to you,' says he, in a low, suppressed voice; 'keep such information to yourself. But I *forbid* you to go into Bébé's room another night so late.'

'Forbid me, indeed!' cry I, indignantly. 'And have *I* nothing to forbid?' (Here I think of the cocked-hat note.) 'You may do as you like, I suppose? You *cannot* err; while *I* am to be scolded and ill-treated because I say "Good night" to a friend. I never heard anything so unjust; and I *won't* be forbidden—so there!'

'It strikes me it must have been a *very* "civil" good night to necessitate his holding your hand for such a length of time and to bring a blush to your cheeks.'

'It was not Sir Mark made me blush,' angrily.

'No? Who, then?'

'*You.*' This remark is as unwise as it is true—a discovery I make a moment later.

'Why?' asks 'Duke, sternly. 'What was there in the unexpected presence of your husband to bring the blood to your face? I had no idea I was such a bug-bear. It looks very much as though you were ashamed of yourself.'

'Well, then—yes— I *was* ashamed of myself,' I confess, with vehement petulance, tapping the ground with my foot. I was ashamed of being caught out there *en déshabillé*, if you want to know. And now that you have made me acknowledge my crime I really do wish you would go back to your own room, Marmaduke, because you are in an awful temper, and I detest being

cross-examined and brought to task. You are ten times worse than papa and more disagreeable.'

Here I give my shoulders an impertinent shrug and fairly turn my back upon him. An instant later and he has slammed the door between us, and I see him no more that night.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

DRIP, drip, drip. Patter, patter, patter. How it does rain, to be sure! If it continues pouring at this present rate, there will be but very little rain left in the clouds in half an hour.

'Just twelve o'clock,' says Mr. Thornton, with a moody sigh, as he pulls out his watch for the twentieth time. 'We are regularly done for if it keeps on five minutes longer, as rain at twelve means rain all day.'

'Mere superstition,' replies Miss Beatoun, rising to flatten her pretty nose against the window-pane, in the vain hope of catching a glimpse of the blue sky.

It is the next day; and as we have arranged to visit a skating-rink in a town some few miles from us the rain is a disappointment; especially to me, as I have never seen a rink.

'I hardly think that you will see one to-day,' says Sir Mark, turning to me, with a smile.

'Seems so odd your never having seen one, dear Mrs. Carrington,' says Blanche Going, sweetly, 'so universal as they now are. When in Paris and passing through London I wonder you had not the curiosity to go and spend a few hours at one. Marmaduke, how very neglectful of you not to get Mrs. Carrington into Prince's!'

'Prince's is no longer the fashion,' replies Marmaduke, curtly. He is sitting rather apart from the rest of us, and is looking gloomy and ill-tempered. He

and I have exchanged no words since our last skirmish—have not even gone through the form of wishing each other a good day.

‘It is getting worse and worse,’ declares Chips, from his standing-point at the window, where he has joined Miss Beatoun.

‘It is always darkest before dawn,’ says that young lady with dauntless courage.

‘So they say,’ murmurs Lord Chandos, catching her eye.

‘Poor Thornton!’ says Sir Mark, with deep sympathy, ‘I don’t wonder at your depression—such a chance thrown away; and you always look so nice on wheels. Our friend Thornton, Mrs. Carrington, is impressed with the belief, and very justly so, that he is an unusually fascinating skater.’

‘Quite so,’ returns Chips, ironically. ‘I wonder what you would all do if you hadn’t me to laugh at? You ought to love me: I come in so handy at times and give you so many opportunities of showing off the brilliancy of your wit.’

‘He grows sarcastic,’ murmurs Mark. ‘This weather, instead of damping him, as it would more frivolous mortals, has the effect of developing his hidden powers.’

‘Let us forget the weather,’ says Bébé, brightly, turning from the contemplation of it to sink into a seat by the fire, ‘and then perhaps it will clear. After making up our minds to go to Warminster and visit a rink, and dine at an hotel and drive home again in the dark and have a general spree, I confess the not being able to do anything has rather put me out.’

We are all assembled in the library, it being the least doleful room in the house on a wet day. As Bébé speaks we all try more or less (Marmaduke being included in the less) to put on a cheerful countenance and enter into light converse. For the most part we succeed, and almost manage to forget our troubles.



‘By the by, Thornton, you used to be a great man on the Turf,’ presently says Sir Mark, addressing Chips, *à propos* of something that has gone before. Chips, who is lounging in a low chair beside Miss Beatoun, his whole round boyish face one cherubic smile, looks up inquiringly. ‘Masters told me you were quite an authority.

‘Oh, not at all,’ returns Mr. Thornton modestly; ‘I don’t pretend to anything. I flatter myself I know a likely animal when I see it—nothing more.

‘I always thought you intended making your fortune in that line,’ continues Sir Mark, lazily. ‘The last time I met you, in the spring, you were radiant in the possession of so many more hundreds than you ever hoped to obtain.’

‘Oh! Mr. Thornton, is it possible *you* go in for betting?’ murmurs Bébé, with a glance enchantingly reproachful. ‘I had placed you on such a high pinnacle in my estimation, and *now* what am I to think? I feel *so* disappointed.’

‘Don’t,’ entreats Chips, sentimentally. ‘If *you* begin to think badly of me I shall do something desperate. Besides, I really only put on a mere trifle now and then—nothing at all to signify—wouldn’t ruin a man if he were at it for ever. You should see how some fellows bet. Don’t you know——’

‘Did you do well last Ascot?’ asks Chandos, in a tone that is meant to be genial.

‘Well, no; not quite so well as I might wish,’ with a faint blush. ‘Fact is, I rather overdid it—risked my little all upon the die—and lost.’

‘Showing how natural talent has no chance against the whims of fickle fortune. Even the very knowing ones, you see, Mrs. Carrington, have to knock under sometimes,’ says Mark.

‘How was it?’ I ask Chips, with a smile.

‘Oh! it was a beastly shame,’ responds that young man. ‘The horse would have won in a walk

if he had got fair play. It was the most outrageous transaction altogether. If the rider had gone straight, there was not an animal in the running could have beaten him. It was the clearest case of pulling you ever saw.'

Lady Blanche laughs softly.

'I never knew an unsuccessful better who didn't say that,' she says. 'I was waiting to hear you. Each man believes the horse he fancies *would* have won only for something. They would die rather than confess themselves ignorant.'

'But I always thought everything was fair and above board on a racecourse,' observes Harriet.

Thornton roars.

'Lady Handcock, you are the most charitable woman alive,' he cries, gaily; 'but I fear in this instance your faith in the goodness of humanity goes too far. I met Hamilton the other day, and he told me a capital story *à propos* of racing honour. You know Hamilton, Chandos?'

'Yes, I think so—middle-sized man, with a fair beard?'

'What a vivid description!' murmurs Miss Beatoun, demurely. 'One so *seldom* sees a middle-sized man, with a fair beard!'

Chandos glances at her quickly, rather amused, I think, by her impertinence; but her eyes are innocently fixed on Thornton, who is evidently full of his story.

'Go on, Thornton,' says Sir Mark, blandly; 'we are all miserable till we learn what befell your friend Hamilton.'

'It was at Fairy House races, last year,' begins Chips, nothing daunted. 'Hamilton was over in Dublin at the time, and went down there to back a horse he knew something about. A rather safe thing it was, if rightly done by; and, knowing the jock, who was a devoted adherent of his own, he went up to him on the course, to know if he might put his money on

with any chance of success. "Wait a while, Misther H.," says his ingenuous friend, turning a straw in his mouth with much deliberation, "an' I'll tell ye. Come to me again in ten minutes." Accordingly in ten minutes Hamilton, seeing him in the Paddock, dressed and mounted, went to him again. "Well?" said he. "Wait yet another little bit, Misther H.," says this imperturbable gentleman; "the instructions ain't final. Meet me in five minutes at that post," indicating a certain spot. So Hamilton met him there, and for the third time asked him impatiently if he meant winning. "I *do*, Misther H.," says he in a mysterious whisper, "*if the reins break!*"

We all laugh heartily, and Bébé, while declaring the story delicious, vows she has lost all faith in mankind for evermore.

'I have *not*,' stoutly maintains Harriet. 'Of course there must be exceptions, but I believe there is a great deal of goodness amongst us all in spite of popular opinion. Why do you look so supercilious, Marmaduke? Don't you agree with me?'

'No, I do not,' replies 'Duke, promptly. 'I think there is very little *real* goodness going. Taking the general mass, I believe them to be all alike bad. Of course there is a great deal in training, and some appear better than others, simply because they are afraid of being found out. That is the principal sin in this life. I don't deny that here and there one finds two or three whose nature is tinged with the divine; these reach nearer the heavens, and are the exceptions that prove my rule.'

'My dear 'Duke, how shockingly uncharitable!' says his sister, slowly; while I, gazing on my husband with open-eyed amazement, wonder vaguely if last night's disturbance has occasioned this outbreak.

'It is uncharitable *always* to speak the truth,' says 'Duke, with a faint sneer. 'You asked me my opinion, and I gave it. Are you acquainted with many

beautiful characters, Harry? I confess I know none. Selfishness is our predominant quality; and many of the so-called religious ones amongst us are those most deeply impregnated with this vice. They follow their religion through fear, not love, because they dread consequences, and object to being uncomfortable hereafter, so do what their hearts loathe through mere selfish terror.'

'I had no idea you could be so eloquent,' laughs Lady Blanche, mockingly, from her low seat. 'Pray go on, Marmaduke; I could listen to you for ever. You are positively refreshing after so much amiability.'

'My dear fellow, you grow bearish,' expostulates Sir Mark, with raised brows and an amused glance. 'We wither beneath your words. Abuse yourself as much as you please, but *do* spare the rest of us. We like to think ourselves perfection—it is very rude of you to undeceive us so brusquely. And how can you give utterance to such sweeping assertions in such company? Have you forgotten your wife is present?'

'No'—with a forced smile—'I have not. But I fear even Mrs. Carrington cannot be considered altogether harmless.' He points this remark with a curiously unloving expression cast in my direction.

'Never mind, Mrs. Carrington,' exclaims Thornton, with his usual vivacity. 'At all events you may count upon *one* devoted admirer, as I, for my part, do not believe you have a fault in the world.'

'Thank you,' I answer, gaily, though secretly I am enraged at Marmaduke's look and tone. 'Thank you very much, Mr. Thornton. I consider myself fortunate in having secured your good opinion. But, Marmaduke'—addressing him with the utmost coolness—'how uncivil you can be! I say nothing of my own feelings—I know I am hopelessly wicked; but your guests, what must *they* think? Take Lady Blanche, for instance—is she not looking the very picture of innocence, though no doubt speechless with indignation? Surely you will exonerate *her*?''

‘No, not even Blanche,’ replies Marmaduke; but even as he condemns her he bends upon her one of his very sweetest smiles.

‘I am the more pleased that you do not,’ says her ladyship, in her low, soft tones, returning his glance fourfold. Even if it were possible I would not be altogether good. Perfection in any shape is the one thing of which we soonest tire.’

‘The day is clearing; the rain has almost ceased,’ announces Lord Chandos, solemnly, at this moment.

I spring to my feet.

‘No!’ cry I, ‘you don’t *mean* it?’

‘I am almost sure I do,’ replies he, sententiously.

And there, indeed, amid the clouds as I run to look at them, shines out a dazzling piece of blue sky that grows and widens as I gaze.

‘It still wants a quarter to one,’ I say, rapidly. ‘We will have lunch at once—no matter whether we eat it or not—and then we shall start for Warminster, and I shall see my rink after all. But first I must go to the gardens. Sir Mark’—in a coquettishly appealing tone, casting at him a very friendly glance from my grey-blue eyes—‘will *you* come with me and take care of me as far as the gates? I have something *very* particular to say to—Cummins.’

I make the little pause maliciously, and raise my long lashes just so much as permits me to obtain a glimpse of Marmaduke.

He is talking pleasantly to Lady Blanche, and evidently means me to understand he is ignorant of my conduct. But I can see a frown on his forehead and certain lines about his mouth that tell me plainly he has both seen and heard and condemned, and I am satisfied.

‘I shall be delighted,’ says Sir Mark, with prudent coldness, and together we leave the room.

An hour later—lunch is over, and I am rushing up

the stairs to don my walking attire. On the topmost landing stands Bébé, already dressed, and about to descend.

As I meet her gaze it arrests me. Surely some expression that closely resembles woe characterises her face. Her eyebrows are slightly elevated, her lips at the corners curving downwards; her cheeks are innocent of nature's rouge; a suspicious pinkness rests upon her lids.

Dear—dear—*dear!* is there nothing but trouble in this world? I, of course, am wretched—that goes without telling—but pretty, bright, *piquante* Bébé, must she too be miserable? What untoward thing can have occurred to bring that wistful look into her eyes?

Turning to my maid, who is following me at a respectful distance, I speak aloud—

‘Martha, I will dispense with your services this afternoon. Miss Beatoun is here, and will give me any assistance I may require.’

So saying I draw my friend into my room and close the door.

‘Now, Bébé, what is it?’ I ask, pushing her into a lounging-chair, and beginning a vigorous search for my sealskin jacket. Martha is a good girl—the best of girls, but she never can put anything in the same place twice running.’

‘Oh, it is nothing—nothing,’ answers Bébé, in a tone almost comical in its disgust. My pride has had a slight fall—my conceit has been a little lowered—no more. I hate myself’ (with a petulant stamp of the foot) ‘for taking it so much to heart; but I *do*, and that is the fact, and I cannot yet overcome the feeling. If I did not know I must have looked like a foolish culprit all the while I think I would not so greatly mind; but my colour was coming and going in a maddening fashion; and then his tone—so quick—so——’

‘Chandos’ tone, I suppose you mean? But you forget, dear—I know nothing.’

‘True—of course not. Well, after you left the library that time with Mark the whole party broke up and dispersed about the house to prepare for this drive, all except myself. I stayed on—unluckily, as it turned out—to finish my novel, until I should be called to lunch. It interested me, and I thought myself sure of solitude for a little time, but in less than three minutes the door was reopened and Chandos came in.’

‘Well?’ I say, as she makes a long pause.

‘Unfortunately it struck me that his coming back so soon again to where he knew I was alone looked, you know, rather particular—as if he wished to say something private to me, and—I had no desire to hear it.’

‘Oh, Bébé!’

‘Well, believe me or not, as you will, I really dreaded his saying anything on the—old topic—to such a degree that I rose and made as though I would instantly quit the room. Oh!’ cries she, with an irrestrainable blush and movement of the hand, ‘I wish I had died before I did *that*.’

‘Why, darling?’

‘Oh! need you ask? Don’t you see how it betrayed my thoughts? Why, it looked as though I made quite sure he was going to propose again. Can’t you understand how horrible it was?’ says Bébé, burying her face in her hands, with an hysterical laugh. ‘*He* understood it so, at all events. He stopped right before me and said deliberately, with his eyes fixed on mine, “Why do you leave the room? I came for a book, and for nothing else, I assure you.” Thus taken aback, I actually stammered and blushed like a ridiculous schoolgirl, and said, weakly, “It is almost time to think of dressing. We start so soon. And besides—I——” Could anything be more foolish? “One would think I had the plague or the pestilence, the way you rush from a room the moment I enter it,”

says he, impatiently. "I swear I am not going to propose again. I have had enough of it. I have no desire whatever to marry a woman against her will. I asked you to be my wife, for the second time, a week or two ago, thinking my poverty had been the cause of your former refusal, and was justly punished for my conceit. Believe me I have brains enough to retain a lesson, once I have learned it; so you may sit down, Miss Beatoun, with the certainty that I shall never again offend you in *that* way." I could never tell you how I felt, Phyllis, during the utterance of these words. My very blood was tingling with shame. My eyes would not be lifted; and, besides, they were full of tears. I felt that I hated both myself and him.'

'It was a very curious speech for him to make,' say I, feeling both puzzled and indignant with Chandos.

'I think he was quite right,' declares she, veering round to resent what seems like an attack on my part. 'It must have angered and disgusted him to see me so confident of his lasting affection as to imagine him ready to make a fresh offer every time people left us *tête-à-tête*. I think any man with spirit would have done just so. No one is to be blamed but myself.'

'On the other hand, why should he conclude you thought anything of the sort?' I say, defending her stoutly in spite of herself. 'He only proved the idea to be quite as uppermost in his mind as it was in yours. I would have said something to that effect had I been you.'

'*Said*, my dear! I could not have even *thought* of anything at the moment, I was so confused. It is the simplest thing possible to think of what would have been the correct thing to say, and to make up neat little speeches, half an hour after the opportunity for uttering them is past, but just on the instant how few have presence of mind!'

'It was provoking,' say I, 'and'—with an irrepres-



sible little laugh—‘funny too. My own impression is he *did* come back to renew his pleading, but saw by your manner it would be useless. Pity you did not insist on knowing the title of the book he ~~was~~ so anxious to procure. At all events it is nothing to be miserable about, dear Bébé.’

‘Oh, I shan’t be miserable either. Now that I have told some one I feel better. I have had a good cry, brought on by thorough vexation, and will now dismiss both the occurrence and his lordship from my mind.’

‘Shall you find that an easy task? The latter part of it, I mean?’

‘Quite easy—nothing more so,’ replies she, with a saucy uplifting of her chin as she leaves me.

As the hat I wish to wear has been locked away in a certain part of a wardrobe where I am certain no hat was ever stowed before, it takes me some time to discover it. When at length I do so I find I am considerably behind time, and, catching up my gloves run hastily along the gallery, and down the western corridor, that will bring me a degree sooner to the hall below.

As I turn the corner I come without any warning upon Marmaduke and Lady Blanche Going, evidently in deep and interesting converse. I stop short; and both, looking up, see me.

Rage and indignation fill me at this unexpected *rencontre*. What *can* this woman have to whisper to my husband that might not be said in public?

Blanche with the utmost composure nods her head, smiles, and vanishes down the staircase, leaving me alone with Marmaduke; while he stands frowning heavily, and apparently much annoyed by what has just been said. His black looks deepen as his eyes meet mine; but as, with raised head and haughty lips, I pass him by he suddenly moves towards me, and, throwing his arms round me, strains me passionately to

him, and turning up my face, kisses me twice, thrice upon my mouth.

Still smarting under my angry thoughts, I tear myself from his embrace and stand aloof, panting with mortification.

‘How dare you?’ I gasp. ‘Don’t attempt to touch me.’

‘What! has your indifference *already* changed to hatred!’ says he, bitterly, as I walk rapidly away.

The sun shines out with redoubled power and brilliancy, and, tooling up Carlisle Street, we find ourselves before the door of the principal hotel in Warminster. Such a goodly turn-out as ours is seldom seen even in this busy, bustling town, and the waiters and ostlers come out to admire and tender their services. To the enterprising owner of this grand hotel belongs the rink, and thither we bend our footsteps.

To see the world on wheels—to see the latest, newest vanity of the Great Fair, is my ambition. Turning a corner we enter a gateway adjoining the hotel; we pass the mystic portal, we pay the inevitable shilling, throw ourselves upon the mercies of the movable barrier, and find ourselves *there*.

Just at first the outside circle of admirers prevents our catching sight of the performers, and the dull grating noise of the machines falls unpleasantly upon our ears. We draw nearer the chattering, gaping crowd, and by degrees edge our way in, until we, too, have a full view of all that is to be seen.

Surely there is a mistake somewhere, and it is ‘wheels, wheels, wheels,’ *not* ‘love,’ that ‘makes the world go round!’

On they come, by twos and threes, in single file, in shaking groups, all equally important, all filled with a desire to get—nowhere. A novice comes running, staggering, balancing towards us; evidently her acquaintance with this new mode of locomotion was of

the vaguest half an hour ago. The crowd passes on, and she must follow it; so, with a look of fear upon her face that amounts almost to agony, she totters onward to brave a thousand falls. A sudden rush past her—the faintest touch does it—she reels; her heels (that on ordinary occasions, to judge by their appearance, must be the staunchest of supports) refuse to uphold her now; her lips part to emit a dying gasp—already she smells the ground, when a kindly hand from behind seizes her, steadies her with good-natured force, and, with a smile of acknowledgment, that confesses the misery of the foregoing minutes, she once more totters, trips, and scrambles to her fate.

I am delighted, entranced. I find myself presently laughing gaily and with all my heart, the galling remembrances of the last few hours swept completely from my brain. I cry ‘Oh!’ at every casualty and grasp my companion’s arm—I admire and smile upon the successful. I begin to wish that I too could skate.

Here comes the adept, with eyes fixed questioningly upon the watchful crowd. Their approving glances fire him with a mad desire to prove to them how superior he is to his compeers. He will do *more* than skate with consummate grace and ease—he will do better than the ‘outside edge’—he will *waltz*!

Oh, daring thought! Now shall he bring down the well-deserved plaudits of the lookers-on. He turns—one, two, three—it is a swing, a hop—not perhaps a ball-room performance, but at least a success. Eyes become concentrated. He essays it again, and again victory crowns his effort. Yet a third time he makes the attempt—alas! that fatal three. Is it that his heel catches his toe, or his toe catches his heel? The result at least is the same: over he goes—disgrace is on him—with a crash he and the asphalte meet.

‘It is monotonous, I think,’ breathes Sir Mark in my ear, in a deprecating tone, and then looks past me at Bébé.

‘It is fatiguing,’ murmurs Harriet, with a yawn. ‘James, if you don’t get me a chair this instant I shall faint.’

‘It is delicious,’ declare I enthusiastically; ‘it is the nicest thing I ever saw. Oh! I wish I could skate.’

‘It makes one giddy,’ says Lady Blanche, affectedly. ‘Do they never turn in this place?’ Almost on her words a bell tinkles somewhere in the distance, and as if by magic they all swerve round and move the contrary way—all, that is, except the tyros, who come heavily, and without a moment’s warning, to their knees.

And now the band strikes up and the last fashionable waltz comes lingeringly to our ears. Insensibly the musical portion of the community on wheels falls into a gentle swinging motion and undulate to the liquid strains of the tender ‘Manolo.’

‘This is better,’ says Lady Handcock, sinking into the chair for which her faithful James has just done battle.

Bébé and Thornton, hand-in-hand, skim past us.

‘Oh! I must, I *will* learn,’ I cry, excitedly. ‘I never saw anything I liked so much. Sir Mark, *do* get me a pair of skates and let me try. It *looks* quite simple. Oh, if Billy were but here!’

Sir Mark goes to obey my command, and I stand by Harriet’s chair, too interested for conversation. How they fly along! the women with more grace in their movements, the men with more science. Here is the fatal corner turn; the numbers are increasing—whirr, crash, down they come, four together, causing an indescribable scene of confusion. Two from the outside circle rush in to succour their fallen darlings. It is a panic—a *mêlée*. Yet stay, after all it is nothing—they are up again, flushed but undaunted—it is all the fortune of war. *Vogue la galère!*

A tall young man, blonde and slight, attracts my

notice. Half an hour ago he struck me as being the gayest of the gay, now his expression, as he slowly wends his way through the skaters, is sad and careworn in the extreme; the terrors of the rink are oppressing him sore, anxiety is printed on his brow; he has but one thought from start to finish—how to reach uninjured the chair he has just left. He never takes but one turn at a time round the arena, and never gains his haven of safety without a long-drawn sigh of relief. The fear of ridicule lies heavy upon him. But what will you? Rinking is the fashion, and for what does a young man live if not to follow the *mode*?

I see, too, the elderly gentleman who, with bent knees and compressed mouth, essays to rival his juniors. He *will* be young, and he *will* skate, whether his doctor ‘will let him or no.’ *Vive la jeunesse!*

*La jeunesse*, in the form of a diminutive damsel, follows closely in his wake; she is of tiny build, and has her hand clasped by one of the tallest young men it has ever been my luck to behold.

‘I pity that young man,’ says Harriet. ‘Titania has secured him for her own.’

And indeed it seems like it. Where she may choose to lead him for the next hour there must he surely go. Were he dying to leave her to join some other, ‘nearer and dearer,’ he will not be able to do so. Can he act the brute and ask her to sit down before she shows any inclination so to do? Can he feign fatigue when she betrays no symptoms of flagging, and regards him with a glance fresh as when first they started? He must only groan and suffer patiently, even though he knows the demon of jealousy is working mischief in the heart of his beloved as she sits silently watching him from a distant corner.

‘What wonderful vitality that small creature develops!’ says Harriet. Probably, at home, if asked to rise twice from her chair, she would declare herself fatigued and *ennuyée* to the last degree; here she

keeps in motion for an hour at a stretch, and is still smiling and radiant.'

'The game seems hardly worth the candle,' remarks Sir James, gazing after Titania's very insipid-looking cavalier.

'My dear, it is worth ten thousand candles,' returns his wife. 'That is young Woodleigh, and you know he came in for all that money on his uncle's death. In such a cause you would not have her countenance fatigue?'

'Here comes her contrast,' remarks Sir James, as a slight, dark woman, very pretty, with just a *soupeçon* of colouring on her pale cheeks and enough shading round her lids to make her dark eyes darker, skates by.

'I have been watching her,' says Harriet. 'She is Mrs. Elton, whose husband died last year—much to her satisfaction, as people say. See, Phyllis, how she is surrounded by admirers; every tenth minute she accepts a new aspirant to her hand, as far as rinking goes. Ah, my dear, see what it is to be a bewitching widow—far better than being a lovely girl. And James positively refuses to give me a chance of trying whether I would be a success if so circumstanced.'

Sir James smiles comfortably, and so do I, while watching the gay widow as she beams and droops and languishes, according to the mood of each companion; amusing all in turn, and knowing herself as universally adored by the opposite sex as she is detested by her own.

'I had great difficulty in getting your skates. I wonder if these are small enough?' whispers Sir Mark in my ear; and turning, I behold him fully equipped for the fray, followed by a subdued little boy, who carries under his arm the articles in question. They prove to be the right size, and soon I find myself standing on four wheels (that apparently go every way in the most impartial manner), grasping frantically my Mentor's arm.

‘Oh, what is the matter with my heels? They won’t stay still,’ I cry, desperately, as my body betrays an inclination to lay itself flat upon the ground. ‘They can’t be right, I am sure. Are all the skates like these?’

‘Yes. Try to walk a little, and you will find it easier. It is wonderful how soon one gets used to the sensation.’

I summon all my pluck and get round the place three times without stopping or falling, thanks to Sir Mark’s strong arm. As I reach my starting-point once more I pause and sink into a vacant chair.

‘I will rest a little,’ I breathe hastily. ‘I am dreadfully tired and frightened. I had no idea it would prove so difficult. Go away, Sir Mark, and take a turn by yourself; and perhaps later on, if you come back for me, I will try again. Oh, I wonder how on earth it is all these people manage to keep upright?’

‘Don’t lose heart,’ says Sir Mark, smiling. ‘Once on a time they all felt just as you do now. Indeed, I think you a very promising beginner.’

He leaves us, and Harriet and I fall to criticising the performers again. After all I think the beginners amuse me most, more especially *now*, when I can ‘deeply sympathise’ with their terrors. The way they stumble against each other, their frequent falls, their earnest faces—earnest as though it were a matter of life and death in which they are engaged—all combine to excite my risible faculties to the last degree.

I laugh merrily and heartily, my colour rises, I clap my hands with glee as two fat men, coming into collision, fall prostrate almost at my feet.

‘How you enjoy everything!’ says Harriet, patting me on the shoulder and laughing herself through sympathy.

‘It is all so new to me,’ I return, with delight; and, glancing up at her, I also catch Sir James’s eyes fixed upon me, filled with pleased amusement.

There are little boys with spindle legs who look all boots and no body—little boy-rinkers and little girl-rinkers, who do their work so beautifully and show such unlimited *go* as puts their elders to shame.

Sir Mark comes back again, and again I am persuaded to rise and court fortune. In my turn I scramble and totter and push and try to believe I am enjoying the moment. At length I break into a little slide—insensibly, as it seems—and after that matters go more smoothly.

‘Ah! now you are getting into the way of it,’ exclaims Sir Mark, almost growing excited over my progress. ‘Just keep on like that, and soon you will master it.’

Half an hour elapses. The others of our party, who have been at it longer than I have, and to whom it is no novelty, have tired of skating and stand once more together in a group.

As I approach them, attended by Sir Mark, I pause to utter a few words.

‘It is lovely, delicious. I am getting on capitally. I shall do it perfectly in no time,’ I gasp, conceitedly; and, instantly slipping, I fall forward helplessly into my companion’s arms.

I get a severe shock, but think myself lucky in that I have escaped the ground.

Sir Mark holds me a shade longer, and perhaps a shade more tenderly, than the occasion requires; and, looking up, I catch Blanche Going’s eyes, and can see that she wears upon her handsome face a smile, half insolent, wholly suspicious. The others must see it too.

Extreme anger grows within my breast. Disengaging myself from Sir Mark’s support, I stand alone, though insecure, and feel that I am rapidly becoming the colour of a rich and full-blown peony. Certainly my bitterest enemy could not accuse me of blushing prettily; and this knowledge, added to what I am already smarting under, renders me furious.



I repent my first move. I regret having so far given in to popular opinion as to withdraw myself from Sir Mark's sustaining arm. Hastily turning to him again—unmindful of Harriet's kind little speech—I hold out to him my hand, and address him with unwonted *empressement*.

'Thank you,' I say: 'but for you I should have come to ignominious grief in the very midst of my boasting. I am in your debt, remember. Will you add to your goodness by taking my hand yet again for a round or two? I want to be a degree more assured. It is not every day,' I add, with a gay, coquettish laugh, 'a lady will make you a generous offer of her hand.'

Marmaduke, as well as Blanche, hears every word. Sir Mark takes my hand very readily, and together we vanish out of sight.

As usual, once my naughtiness is a *fait accompli*, I suffer from remorse. When next I find myself near 'Duke I am mild and submissive as a ringdove. Would he but speak to me now I feel I could pardon and be pardoned with the utmost cheerfulness. Alas! he remains mute and apparently unforgiving, being in the dark as to my softened mood.

A deep curiosity to learn his exact humour towards me seizes hold of me, and for the satisfying of it I determine to open fire and be the first to break down the barrier of silence that has risen between us.

'What a pity we must leave this place so soon!' I say, with exceeding geniality. 'It opens again at half-past seven. If we do not start for home, 'Duke, until ten o'clock, why should we not spend another hour here after dinner?'

'At that hour the place will be thronged with shopkeepers and the townsfolk generally,' replies he, in his coldest tones, without looking at me.

'I should not mind them in the very least,' eagerly.

'I dare say not. There are few things you *do* mind;

but *I* should,' returns 'Duke, slowly and decisively; and, walking away, leaves me *tête-à-tête* with Sir Mark Gore.

All the sweetness within me changes to gall. I am once again angered and embittered; nay, more, I long to revenge myself upon him for the severity of his manner. At such moments who has not found the tempter near?

Sir Mark, bending his head, says smoothly, 'You should remember how tired Marmaduke must be of this kind of thing. He has seen so much of it. It was good enough of him, I think, to drive here to-day at all. No doubt he shudders at the thought of visiting a country rink twice in six or seven hours. Will you allow *me* to be your escort here to-night? If it proves unbearable we need only stay a few minutes. I am sure Marmaduke would in reality wish you to be gratified——'

He hesitates and regards me quietly. I am by no means as sure as he is of Marmaduke's amiability; but at this instant I care for nothing but the opportunity of showing my husband how little I regard his likes or dislikes.

'I daresay you are right,' I return, calmly. 'Of course it is just the sort of amusement a man would find dull, once the novelty was worn away. It is self-denying of you to offer your services. Yes, I think I will come here to-night for a few minutes, if only to see how the scene looks by lamplight.'

'Much gayer than by daylight. That you can imagine,' replies he, evenly, his eyes bent upon the ground.

Once having pledged myself to go, I feel no inclination to break my word. All through dinner mutinous thoughts support me in my determination.

Having led my guests back into the reception-room, I pass into the adjoining apartment unnoticed, and,

hurriedly putting on my hat and jacket, slip out into the hall, where I find Sir Mark awaiting me.

Now for the first time, looking out into the darkening night, I understand what fear means. My heart sinks. What wild and foolish thing am I about to do? Obstinacy and the shame of confessing myself unnerved alone prevent me from turning back again, and it is with a beating, cowardly pulse, though an undaunted exterior, that I cross the threshold with my companion.

As I have said, the rink adjoins the hotel, and a very few minutes bring us once more within its shelter. During those few minutes my usual talkativeness deserts me—I am silent as the grave. Sir Mark, too, makes no attempt at conversation.

Inside, the laughing, moving crowd somewhat distracts me from my gloomy apprehensions. The bright glare of the lamps, the music of the band, which is playing its liveliest air, renders me less fearful of consequences. Sir Mark gets me a pair of skates; he holds out his hand; I move forward—the crush is not so great as I had imagined—the music cheers me. After all what harm have I done? I stumble; a merry laugh forces itself from my lips; all is forgotten save the interest of this new pastime.

Can a quarter of an hour have passed away? I am chattering gaily, and clinging to my cavalier, in a fashion innocent, indeed, but rather pronounced, when, looking up, I encounter Marmaduke's eyes fixed upon me from the doorway. There is in them an expression strange and, to me at least, new—an expression that strikes terror to my heart as I gaze.

Sir Mark, unaware of his presence, continues to issue instructions and guide my quivering footsteps until we are within a few feet of my husband. Loosing my hands then from his grasp, I precipitate myself upon Marmaduke and cling to him for the support he coolly allows me to take.

Sir Mark, propelled by the push I have given him

in parting, skates on some little distance from us, giving me time to gasp, 'Oh, 'Duke, don't be angry. I liked it so much to-day, and you said we would not start before ten; so I knew I had plenty of time. You are not angry, are you?'

By this time—before 'Duke can reply—if, indeed, he would deign to notice me, which I begin to doubt—Sir Mark is returned, and is now addressing my husband with the utmost *bonhomie*.

'See what it is to be of a dissipated turn, Carrington. In default of more congenial sport I could not resist the pleasures of an obscure rink. I fear it was foolish of me, though, to put it into Mrs. Carrington's head; though I really think there are few draughts anywhere, it is such a lovely night.'

He says this as though the only earthly objection that could be raised to my coming out at this hour with him alone is the fear of my catching cold.

'Don't you think you have had enough of it now?' says 'Duke, calmly—*too* calmly—still with that strange expression in his eyes, though perfectly polite. He does not look at me, and the hand I still hold in desperation is limp within my grasp, and takes no heed of the gentle, beseeching pressure I bestow upon it every quarter of a minute. 'It is getting rather late'—glancing at his watch—'I fear I must ask you to return at once, as the traps are ordered round; and it will not do for Mrs. Carrington to keep her guests waiting.'

'I want a boy to take off my skates,' I say, submissively, shocked at the lateness of the hour—it wants but ten minutes to ten.'

'True. But boys are never in the way when wanted. Gore, I am sure *you* will not mind unfastening Mrs. Carrington's skates, just for once,' in a queer voice.

'I shall be delighted,' says Mark, courteously, going down on his knees before me. As he bows his head I

barely catch a certain gleam in his eyes that is neither laughter nor triumph, yet is a curious mingling of both.

I feel ready to cry with vexation.

'You will follow me as soon as you can,' says 'Duke; and, to my amazement, walks steadily away.

'I am afraid I have got you into a scrape,' says Mark, in a low tone, as he bends over my left foot and with slow fingers draws out the leather straps.

'How do you mean?' I ask, haughtily, feeling passionate anger in my heart towards him at the moment, regarding him as the cause of all my misery.

'I mean—of course I don't know—but I fancied Carrington was angry with you for coming here with—that is—so late.' His hesitation and stammering are both affected and untrue.

'Not a bit of it,' I reply, stoutly; 'he probably does not like being kept waiting—men never do. He is wonderfully punctual himself, and of course I ought to have been back ages ago. I wish now I had never come. Can't you be a little quicker?' with an impatient movement of my toe. 'It don't take the boys hours to get off each skate.'

'You are in a desperate hurry *now*.'

'I *am* in a desperate hurry, and I hate vexing Marmaduke. There, hold it tightly, and I will pull my foot out. Now, try and be a little quicker about this one.'

'I assure you I am doing my best,' sulkily. 'I don't want to keep you here, in your present mood, longer than I can help.'

'I should think not,' say I, with a disagreeable laugh.

As the skate comes off he flings it aside with a savage gesture, and, rising, offers me his arm, which I decline.

'We must run for it,' I say, indifferently, 'and I never can do that to my own satisfaction when holding on to anyone. I detest jogging.'

‘Why don’t you say at once you detest *me*?’ exclaims Sir Mark, roughly, and summarily disposes of a small boy who is unhappy enough to be in his path at the moment.

‘I will if you like,’ return I, equably; and in silence as complete as when we set out we return to the hotel.

When we arrive everyone is busy getting on his or her outdoor things. My sealskin jacket and velvet hat already adorn my person, so no convenient business of that kind comes to my aid to help me to carry off the confusion and secret fear that is consuming me. I stand somewhat apart from the rest looking strangely like a culprit. Even Bébé, who is a sure partisan, is so standing before a distant mirror adjusting the most coquettish of headgears as to be unable to see me, while young Thornton chatters to her admiringly upon one side, and Lord Chandos glowers at her from the other.

Presently somebody approaches, and to my astonishment Sir James Handcock, with an unusual amount of energy in his eyes and manner, takes up a position near me, and actually volunteers a remark.

‘Remember I am old enough to be your father,’ he begins, abruptly, ‘and don’t be angry with me. I feel that I must speak. I don’t want to see you made unhappy. I want you to cut the whole thing. Flirtations, however innocent, were never meant for tender-hearted little girls like you.’

I am so utterly taken aback, so altogether surprised, that I even forget to blush, and can do nothing but stand staring at him in silent bewilderment. Sir James to deliver a lecture! Sir James to take upon him the part of Mentor! is more than my brain can grasp at a moment’s notice. Surely I have been guilty of something horrible, unpardonable, to shake him out of his taciturnity!

Harriet, coming up at this juncture, hastens to assist me out of my dilemma.

‘Has he been scolding you?’ she asks, briskly, with her quick ready smile. ‘James, I won’t have Phyllis frightened to death by a stern old moralist like you. Go and get things together; and if you meet a comfortable motherly grey shawl, remember it is mine.’

Thus dismissed, James, ever obedient, departs, casting a kindly glance at me as he goes. Harriet lays her hand lightly on my arm.

‘Don’t look so horrified, child,’ she says. ‘James’s voice, from continual disuse, has degenerated into a growl, I own, but it need not reduce you to insensibility. He is awkward, but he means well, as they say in the British drama. Come—with a faint pressure—‘try to look more cheerful, or people will begin to wonder and imagine all sorts of unlikely things. You have made a mistake; but then a mistake is not a crime.’

‘What have I done?’ I ask, rousing myself. ‘I only wanted to see the rink again, and ‘Duke would not take me. He was unkind in his manner, and vexed me. Sir Mark offered to take charge of me. I believe I wanted to show ‘Duke I could go in spite of him, but I never thought of—of anything else; and now ‘Duke is so angry he will not even speak to me.’

‘Oh, that is nonsense—of course he will speak to you. You have committed a little folly, that is all. I can quite understand it. Probably, under like circumstances, and at your age, I would have been guilty of the same. But it was foolish nevertheless.’

‘He should not have spoken to me as he did.’

‘I dare say not; though I don’t know what he said, and do not wish to know. There are always faults on both sides. And now, Phyllis, as we are on the subject, let me say one word. You know I am fond of you—that I think you the dearest little sister-in-law in the world. Therefore you will hear me patiently. Have nothing more to say to Mark Gore. He is very

—unfortunate in his—friendships. I do not wish to say anything against him, but no good ever came of being too intimate with him. Are you offended with me? Have I gone too far, Phyllis?’

‘No, no,’ anxiously retaining the hand she half-withdraws, ‘I am glad, as it was on your mind, you spoke. But you cannot think—you cannot believe —’ I am too deeply agitated to continue.

‘I believe nothing but what is altogether good of you—be sure of that,’ she answers, heartily. ‘But I dread your causing yourself any pain through thoughtlessness. Remember “how easily things go wrong,” and how difficult it is sometimes to set them right again. And—Marmaduke loves you.’

‘I wish I had never seen this odious rink,’ I whisper, passionately. ‘I will never go to one again. I wish I had never laid eyes on Mark Gore. I hate him. I——’

‘Good child,’ interposes she, calmly, as an antidote to my excitement. ‘Now, go and make your peace with your husband. See, there he is. Marmaduke, Phyllis is too cold in this coat; get her something warm to put round her shoulders.’

Mechanically I obey the faint push she gives me and follow ‘Duke into the dimly-lighted hall. He strides on in front, and takes not the slightest notice of my faltering footsteps.

‘Marmaduke,’ I whisper, nervously, ‘Marmaduke, may I drive home with you?’

‘With me! For what?’

His tone is stern and uncompromising. My new-found courage evaporates.

‘Because I—I want to—very much,’ I answer, feebly, much dispirited.

‘You came here with Gore. Why not return with him? It seems to me far better for all parties you should do so.’

‘But I do not wish it. I would rather drive home



with anyone than Sir Mark Gore. Oh, Marmaduke! please let me go with you.'

'It is rather late to think of saving appearances, if you mean that.'

'I do not mean it. I am not thinking of anything but you.'

He laughs unpleasantly.

'Did Harriet tell you to make that sweet little speech?'

'No,' in a low tone.

'Do you imagine you are pleasing me by making this request?' he exclaims angrily, glancing down at me as I stand staring up at him, my head barely reaching his shoulder. Reproach and entreaty are in my uplifted eyes, but they do not soften him. 'Do you think you are offering me compensation? Pray do not for a moment believe I am either hurt or annoyed by your behaviour of this evening. Why should I? You are not the only woman in the world who has suddenly developed a talent for flirtations.'

'Marmaduke, what are you saying? Of what are you accusing me?'

I am nearly in tears by this time, and cannot find words to argue or deny the horrid imputation of coquetry.

'Do not let me stand in the way of your amusements. Of course when I chose to marry a child—and a child without a spark of affection for me—I must learn not to cavil at consequences. Understand, Phyllis, it is a matter of indifference to me whether you drive home with Mark Gore or any other man. Do not give yourself any annoyance, under a mistaken impression that you may be gratifying me. Take your choice of an escort.'

'I have taken it,' I say, dolefully, 'but the one I want won't take me. Marmaduke, how unkind you are! Do you, then, *refuse* to drive me home?'

'If you insist on sitting beside me you can do so,'

he yields, ungraciously. 'You will find it stupid, as I am in no mood for conversation, and have no desire for your company.'

'Nevertheless I will force it on you,' I cry, with some faint spark of pride and indignation. 'Though you hate me I will return with no one but you.'

And so it is settled, and soon we are driving side by side under the brilliant dancing stars.

It is a long, long drive—much longer, it seems to me, in the chill night than in the glare of day, and not one word does my companion speak. Once, when the moon rushes out with a white gleam from behind the scudding clouds, I take courage to look at him; but he is biting his moustache, and wears upon his brow a heavy frown that completely freezes on my lips the few silly words I would have uttered.

Once, too, as his hand lies bare upon his knee I venture to place my fingers timidly upon it, but he shakes them off, under a plain pretence of adjusting the reins; and thus, twice repulsed, I have no heart to make a further advance.

So, in dead silence, we make our journey, listening absently to the chatter of those behind and the sound of the horses' feet as they bravely cover the ground.

In silence we reach our home, in silence he helps me down, and with the sorriest pain at my heart it has ever yet known I go upstairs and shut myself into my room.

Martha, under a mistaken impression that I am what she is pleased to term 'poorly,' pours out some eau de Cologne and proceeds to bathe my forehead with vigorous concern; and such is the forlornness of my state, that I cannot bring myself to bid her begone. When she has put me through the various stages of undressing, has left me ready for bed, and insisted on hearing me say I am immensely better, she departs, to my infinite relief.

I turn dismally in my chair, and begin to wonder

what I am to do next. Every minute my crime appears more hideous—I feel more positive he will never forgive me.

Strangely enough, as my own misdemeanours grow in size and importance his decrease, until at length they sink into utter insignificance. The remembrance of that pink note alone rankles, and perhaps even that could be explained.

The hours slip by. 'Duke's foot is to be heard slowly pacing his own floor.

I must and will compel him to make friends with me. How can I face a long sleepless night such as I know will be mine if I go to bed unpardoned? I will make one more effort, and this time I will not be unsuccessful. As I have not now, and never have had, a particle of pride in my composition, it takes me very little thinking to decide on this course.

I am sitting before my fire as I develop this idea, toasting my bare toes in a rather purposeless manner, preparatory to jumping into bed. Unlike most people, I can endure any amount of heat to the soles of my feet.

Mechanically I slip into my blue slippers and, rising, go to the glass. Yes, what I see pleases me—I certainly do look nice in my dressing-gown. No other style of garment, no matter how bewitching or elaborate, suits me half as well. This particular gown at which I am now gazing profoundly is of white cachemire, lined and wadded, and trimmed profusely with pale blue. There is a dear little frill round the neck that almost makes me love myself. It is a gift of Marmaduke's. Walking one day in Paris, during our honeymoon, it had attracted our attention in a shop-window, and he had insisted on my going into the shop then and there and making myself the owner of it. Surely when he sees me now he will remember the circumstance, and it will soften him.

Ah! he was very fond of me then, I recollect, with a sigh.

My hair is streaming down my back far below my waist; I am looking well, but young—very young; indeed, I am painfully conscious that, now my high-heeled shoes are lying under a chair, I might easily be mistaken for a child of fourteen. The thought is distasteful. Hastily putting up my hands, I wind my hair round and round my head until I have reduced it to its every-day decorous fashion; only to find that rolls and smoothness do not accord well with a *négligé* costume.

Looking at myself again with a critical eye, I am again dissatisfied. I may appear older, I certainly do not present so ‘fetching’ a *tout ensemble*; so, with much vicious haste, I once more draw out the hairpins and let my straight brown hair hang according to its fancy. Being now at last convinced I am to be seen at my best, I proceed to act upon the thought that has caused all this unwonted vanity. I go softly to Marmaduke’s dressing-room door, armed with my brush, and begin to batter at it pretty loudly.

‘Marmaduke, Marmaduke!’ I cry, but to obtain no answer. That he is within is beyond all doubt, as every now and then through the thick oaken door I can hear a sound or two.

Again I exercise my lungs, again I batter at the door.

‘Duke — Marmaduke!’ I cry once more, impatiently.

‘What do you want?’ demands my husband, in a voice that sends my heart into my blue slippers.

‘I wan’t to get in,’ I return, as meekly as one can when one’s tone is raised to its highest pitch.

‘You cannot now; I am busy.’

‘But I must. ’Duke, do open the door. I have something of the utmost importance to say to you.’

After a moment or two I can hear him coming slowly to the door. In another instant he has unlocked it, and is standing in the doorway, in an

attitude that is plainly meant to bar my further approach.

‘Won’t you let me in?’ I say; ‘I want to speak to you, I have something to tell you.’

Here I make a dive under the arm he has placed against one side of the door as a prudent barricade, and gain the dressing-room. Having so far succeeded, I pause, to glance timidly at him.

He has divested himself of his coat and waistcoat, and has evidently been brushing his hair, as it is smooth to the last degree, and has about it a general air of being ready to enter a ball-room at a moment’s notice.

‘You might be going to a reception, your hair is so beautifully dressed,’ I say, with a weak attempt at raillery and composure.

‘Did you nearly break down the door, to come and tell me that?’ asks he, without a vestige of a smile.

Once again my eyes seek the carpet. All my affected nonchalance deserts me. I feel frightened. Never before has his voice sounded so harsh when addressed to me. I put my hands behind me, and grasp nervously the torrent of hair that flows down my back. For the second time it occurs to me how abominably young I must be looking. Somehow the word ‘Doll’ writes itself before my lowered eyes.

‘No,’ I say, in a whisper. ‘I came to ask you to forgive me. To tell you I am very sorry for it all.’

‘Are you? I am glad of that. In my opinion you could not be too sorry.’

‘Oh, Duke, do not be *too* hard to me. I did not mean to make you so *very* angry. I did not think there was any harm, in what—I did.’

‘*No harm?* No harm in flirting so outrageously as to bring down upon you the censure of all your guests? No harm in making yourself the subject of light gossip? Do you know that ever since last night, when you chose to disgrace both yourself and me by

your conduct, I have felt half maddened. "*Angry*," the word does not express what I feel. A hundred times during these past few hours I have with the utmost difficulty restrained myself.'

'I don't see that I have done anything so very terrible; I have not behaved worse than—than others I could name; I don't believe anybody noticed me,' I reply miserably, and most untruthfully.

'Pshaw! How blind you must think people! Do you suppose they will not comment freely on your going to that low place with Gore, at nine o'clock at night, *alone*? I own my belief in their dulness or good nature is not as comfortable a one as yours. Blanche Going, at all events, spoke to me openly about it.'

I instantly take fire.

'No doubt,' I cry, with passion. 'Lady Blanche Going has her own reasons for wishing to degrade me in my husband's sight. She is a wicked woman! Were I to do *half* what she has done, and is capable of doing, I would be ashamed to look you in the face. I *hate* her! If you believe what *she* says, rather than what *I* say, of course there is little use in my speaking further in my own defence.'

'I believe only what I see,' returns my husband significantly, 'and that—I regret to say it of you Phyllis—is more than I can think of with calmness.'

He turns from me as he speaks, and begins to pace excitedly up and down the room, a frown born of much anger upon his forehead.

'To think you should have chosen *that* fellow, who has hardly a shred of character left, as your—*friend*.'

It would be impossible to put on paper the amount of scorn he throws into the last word.

'He is no friend of mine,' I say, sullenly, beating my foot petulantly against the ground. 'I always understood he was a particular favourite of yours. If you consider him such a disreputable creature, why did you invite him to your house?'

‘Because I was unfortunately under the impression I could ask any man with safety into my *wife’s* house,’ says he loftily; and the quotation in which Cæsar’s wife is brought to bear comes to my mind—I am almost tempted to mention it for purposes of provocation, but refrain. In truth, I am really unhappy, and at my wits’ end by this. Surely, I cannot have so altogether forgotten myself as he seems to imagine.

‘There are worse people here than Mark Gore,’ I remark, still sullen.

‘If there are I don’t know them; and certainly do not wish to discuss them. The misdemeanours of the world do not concern me, it is with you alone I have to deal. Ever since Gore entered this house you have shown an open and most undignified desire for his society. I bore it all in silence, neither thwarting you, nor exhibiting my displeasure in any way; but when I see you casting aside common prudence, and making yourself a subject for scandalous remarks, I think it is high time for me to interfere and assert my authority. Were you several years younger than you are, you are still quite old enough to know right from wrong; and for the future—’ here he stops short close beside me, and, with his blue eyes flashing, goes on, ‘for the future I will insist on your conducting yourself as my wife should.’

When a man is without his coat and waistcoat, and thinks himself ill-used, he generally looks more than his actual height. Marmaduke, standing before me with uplifted hand to enforce his remarks, and with a very white face, certainly appears uncomfortably tall. He is towering over poor little me in my heel-less shoes and white gown, and for a moment it occurs to me that I ought to feel frightened; the next instant anger has overpowered me, and raised me to his level.

‘How *dare* you speak to me like that? By what right do *you* use such language? You who every hour of the day make yourself conspicuous with that horrible cousin of yours? Do you suppose, then, that I have

no eyes—that I cannot fathom motives, and actions, and——’

‘What do mean?’ interrupts he, haughtily.

‘That sounds very well, but if, when you accused me of flirting with Mark Gore, I had drawn myself up, and asked, in an injured tone, “what you meant,” you would very soon have told me I knew only too well. Have I not noticed you with Blanche? Do you ever leave her side? Whispering in corridors—lingering in conservatories—letting her write you letters. Oh! I know *everything*!’ cry I, absolutely sobbing with long pent-up rage and grief.

‘Write me letters!’ repeats ‘Duke in utter bewilderment.

‘Yes; long, *long* letters. I saw it.’

‘Blanche never in her life wrote me a long letter, or any other letter, that I can recollect.’

‘Oh! When I saw it with my own eyes, and only yesterday, too! How *can* you deny it? In the morning she pretended she had a headache, and I went up to ask her how she was, and there on the table was a pink note, with three of the pages closely written over, and while I stayed she folded it into a cocked hat; and when I came home in the evening I went into your room—*this* room—for some eau de Cologne, and it was lying *there* on that table under my *nose*,’ I wind up, with passionate vulgarity.

‘I think you must be raving,’ says ‘Duke, his own vehemence quieted by mine. ‘I don’t know what you are talking about. A letter—yet stay,’ a look of intelligence coming into his face; and going over to a drawer, he rummages there for a moment, and at length produces the very three-cornered note that has caused me so many jealous pangs. ‘Is this the note you mean?’

‘Yes, it is,’ coming eagerly forward.

‘I now recollect finding this in my room, when I returned from shooting yesterday. She asks me to do



a commission for her, which, as it happens, quite slipped my memory until now. Take and read it, and see how just were your suspicions.'

As I put out my hand, I know that I am acting meanly, but still I do take it, and opening it, find my three closely-written pages have dwindled down to half a one. Five or six lines, carelessly scrawled, are before me.'

'Are you satisfied?' asks 'Duke, who, half-sitting on the table with folded arms, is watching me attentively.

'Yes,' in a low voice, 'I was wrong. This is not the note I saw with her. I now understand she must have meant *that* one for—for somebody else, and knowing I saw it, sent this to you to blind me.'

'*More* suspicions, Phyllis! As to what other charges you have brought against me, I can only swear that when I told you a year ago you were the only woman I had ever really loved I spoke the truth.'

'From all you have said to me to-night, I can scarcely imagine you would now repeat those words,' I say, in trembling tones.

'Yes, I would. If I live to be an old man, I shall never love again as I have loved, and *do* love, you.'

'Yet you are always meeting Blanche,—you are always with her. Only this very morning I found you both together in the corridor in earnest conversation.'

'It was quite by accident we met; I had no idea she was there.'

'She was speaking to you of me?'

'She said something about your manner towards Gore the night previous. It was something very kind, I remember, but it angered me to think anyone had noticed you, though in my heart I knew it must be so. It was too palpable. She meant nothing hurtful.'

'The wretch! 'Duke, listen to me, and believe me. If I had not felt positive that note,' moving a little

nearer and laying my finger upon it, 'was the one I saw with her, I would never have acted towards Mark Gore as I did last night. But I felt wounded and cut to the heart, and tried to torture you as I was being tortured. It was foolish, wicked of me, I know, but it made no one so miserable as myself.'

'But then—the rink.' He speaks very quietly now, but he has come off the table, and is standing before me, one hand resting on it, very close to mine, but not touching. I have crept still nearer, and am gazing earnestly into his face with large wistful eyes.

'It was the same longing for revenge made me go there—nothing else. I had tried to make up with you by asking you to take me to the rink in the evening, but you would not meet my advances, and answered me very cruelly.' My lips tremble. 'Your words restored all my anger. I was determined to show you I could go there without your permission. Sir Mark was on the spot, and asked me to go with him; it was all the same to me who I went with, so long as I could defy you, and I agreed to accompany him; not, as you thought, because I wished to be with him, but only to vex you. I thought of no one but you. It would not trouble me if I never saw Mark Gore again. You believe me, 'Duke? I never told you a wilful lie, did I?' two heavy tears long gathering roll down my cheeks.

'Never,' replies he, hoarsely.

Silence follows his last word. We stand very near, yet separate, gazing into each other's eyes. Presently, impulsively, his hand moves, and closes firmly upon mine. For an instant longer we gaze, and then I am in his arms, crying as if my heart would break.

'You don't care for her; *say* you don't care for her,' I sob entreatingly.

'Phyllis, how can you ask me? To care for that

worldly-wise woman, when I have *you* to love, my own darling—my angel!’

This is comforting; it almost sounds as though he were calling her bad names, and I sob on contentedly from the shelter of his arms.

‘And you will never speak to her again, will you, *dear* ’Duke?’

‘Oh, my pet! You forget she is a guest in the house. How can I avoid speaking and being civil to her?’

‘Of course I don’t mean *that*. But you will have no *tête-à-têtes*, and you won’t be so attentive to her, and you will be very glad when she goes away?’

‘I will indeed, most sincerely delighted, if her staying causes you one moment’s unhappiness. She speaks of leaving next week; let us be polite to her for these few remaining days—poor Blanche! and then we will forget she ever lived.’

‘Yes,’ I acquiesce, and then there is a pause in the conversation. Is he not going to touch on the other cause of war. For a little time I am filled with wonderment; then I say shyly, ‘You do not ask me about Mark Gore?’

‘No,’ replies he, hastily, ‘nor will I. I understand everything—I believe all you said. A misconception arose between us, now it is at rest for ever, let us refer to it no more. Now that it is at an end I feel rather flattered at your being so jealous; it tells me you must be getting to care for me a little.’

‘Oh, *caring* is a poor thing. I think now I love you better than anyone in the world except——’

‘Billy, and Roly, and Mamma,’ he mimics me, laughing, though he bites his lips; ‘the old story.’

‘Wrong; I was going to say mother only. Somehow, Billy and Roly of late do not seem so dear as you.’ I stroke his face patronisingly.

‘Only mother!’ he says with a gay laugh (how many weeks have passed since last I heard that laugh):

‘why, that is much better. Billy always appeared the most formidable rival. I am progressing in your good books. In time I may even be able to vanquish mother.’

‘I am so glad I made that onslaught on your door a little while ago,’ declare I merrily, ‘and I think you were very undecided about letting me in. How good it is to be *quite* friends again: and we have not been that for a long time. Oh, is not jealousy a horrible pain?’

“And to be wroth with those we love  
Doth work like madness on the brain,”

quotes Duke softly.

‘It all began by Mark Gore telling me you were once engaged to Blanche Going.’

‘What a lie!’ cries Duke, so eagerly, that I cannot choose but believe him. ‘How often am I to tell you I never loved anyone but you?’

‘That is another thing. Men always imagine when they form a new attachment, that the old ones contained no real love. What I should like to know is how many you asked to marry you?’ My words are uttered jestingly, yet his face changes, very slightly, ever so little, yet it certainly changes. Only a little pallor, a little faint contraction, nothing more. It is gone almost as soon as it is there.

‘I never asked Blanche, at all events,’ he laughs lightly. And not until many days have come and gone do I remember his singular hesitation.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

Two days have passed; two days that have brought back to me all the light and life and gladness of my girlhood. Never since my marriage have I been so happy as now.

Marmaduke and I are the best of friends, there is not so much as the shadow of a cloud between us, and I have convinced myself that, as I was the most foolish girl in the world, so am I now the luckiest, and that 'Duke is the dearest old boy to be found anywhere. If I still feel guilty of having no passionate attachment for my husband, I console myself with the thought that I am probably incapable of a grand passion, and that haply I shall get through life all the more comfortably in consequence.

Harriet and Bébé notice the new relations existing between me and my husband with undisguised pleasure, but wisely make no comment. Sir James sees it too, and once, in passing me, smiles and pats me approvingly on the shoulder. Dora and George Ashurst are too much taken up with each other, and their approaching nuptials, to notice anything but their own tastes and predilections. But Blanche Going sees it with an evil sneer.

It is three o'clock in the afternoon. Outside, the world is looking cold and uninviting; inside, all is warmth and apparent contentment.

Some of us are in the billiard-room knocking about the balls, but doing more talk than honest work. I for my part am starting for a brisk run to the gardens, with a view to bringing Cummius to order.

Cummins is an ancient Scotchman, old, crusty, and valuable, who has lived as head gardener at Strange-moore for more years than he can remember, and who has grown sour in the Carrington service. Having made himself more than usually obnoxious to-day, and declined to part with some treasured article of his rearing for anyone's benefit, the cook has tearfully appealed to me, and I have promised to exert myself, and coax my own gardener into giving me some of my own property. Throwing round me, therefore, a cosy shawl, fur-lined, and covering my head with the

warmest velvet hat I own, I sally forth, bent on conquest.

The air is keen and frost-bitten. As I hurry along one of the smaller paths, hedged in on either side by giant evergreens, with my chin well buried in my fur, I come suddenly upon Sir Mark Gore, leisurely strolling, and smoking a cigar.

Ever since my explanation with Marmaduke, I have carefully avoided Sir Mark. Not once has he had an opportunity of speaking with me alone. Not once have I suffered him to draw me into personal conversation. Consequently, I am doubly put out and annoyed by this *rencontre*—conscience telling me he cares more for me than is at all to be desired.

Seeing me he flings the cigar over the hedge, and comes more quickly forward.

‘Oh, don’t do that,’ I say, as unconcernedly as I well can; ‘you have recklessly wasted a good cigar. I am in a desperate hurry, and cannot stay to interfere with your smoking.’

‘It is the simplest thing in the world to light another,’ replies he, coolly. ‘But what a day for you to be out! I heard you say at lunch you meant going, but felt positive this bitter wind would daunt you. May I accompany you in your desperate hurry? Is it an errand of mercy—a case of life or death?’

His easy manner reassures me.

‘I am going to entreat Cummins,’ I say, laughing. ‘Don’t you pity me? Cannot you understand what a difficult task I have laid out for myself? No; I think you had better not come. I shall be able to use more persuasive arts if left to deal with him alone.’

‘I would back you to win, were he the king of the Cannibal Islands himself. If I must not witness your triumph, may I at least be your escort on the road to it?’

I can see he is obstinately bent on being my companion, and grow once more disquieted

‘Ye-es, if you wish it,’ I say, with obvious unwillingness; ‘but it is such a little way now it scarcely seems worth your while.’

‘I think it very well worth my while, and accept your *gracious* permission,’ replies Sir Mark, with a quiet stress on the adjective, and a determination not to notice my evident objection to his company. So there is no help for it, and we walk on side by side in silence.

Presently, in a low voice, he says suddenly, and without preface,

‘Why do you avoid me, Mrs. Carrington? What have I done to be tabooed as I have been for the last two days? Have I offended you in any way?’

‘Offended me?’ I stammer (when people are unexpectedly asked an obnoxious question, what would they do if they could not repeat their questioner’s last words). ‘Of course you have not offended me. How could you? What can have put such a ridiculous idea into your head?’

‘Your own conduct. Do you think I have not seen, and felt, your changed manner?’ He is speaking almost in an undertone. ‘Were I your greatest enemy, you could not treat me with more distant coolness. You scarcely deign to speak to me—your eyes carefully avoid mine—you hardly answer when I address you. Surely you must have a motive for all this.’

‘In the first place I do not acknowledge your “this.” You only imagine my manner changed. I certainly have no motive for being rude to you.’

‘Then I think you have treated me very cruelly. Very capriciously, considering all things.’

The last words are barely distinct, he is evidently using great self-control, but in my present nervous state all sounds are very clear to me.

‘What things, Sir Mark?’ I demand, with an irrepressible touch of *hauteur*. He is looking steadily at me,—so steadily, that, in spite of myself, to my

mortification and disgust, I feel I am blushing furiously. Still I hold my ground, I absolutely decline to let my eyes fall before his.

‘I suppose,’ says Sir Mark, very quietly still, ‘when a woman has led a man on to love her until he is mad enough to lose his head, and imagine he has awakened in her mind some faint interest in himself, she is not to be held responsible for any mischief that may come of it. I say I suppose not. But it is, perhaps, a little hard on the man.’

‘I do not understand you,’ I say, with as much calmness as I can summon, though, in truth, I am horribly frightened, and can feel my heart beating heavily against my side.

‘Do you not?’ exclaims he, with a rapid vehement change of tone; ‘then I shall explain. I am not so blind but I can see now all that has been happening here during the past month. Were you jealous of Marmaduke? Did you imagine he could love another, when you were ever before him? Did you seek to revenge yourself upon him, by turning your sweet looks and sweeter words upon me, by showering upon me all the childish maddening graces of which you are capable, until you stole the very heart out of my body?’

‘Oh, don’t,’ I cry, tremulously, recoiling from him, a look of horrified amazement on my face. ‘You do not know what you are saying. It is terrible. I will not listen to you.’

‘Yes, you will,’ fiercely. ‘Does it hurt you to hear it? Does it distress you to know that I love you—I, who never before loved anyone—that I love you with a passion that no words could describe. You have ruined my life; and now that you have attained your object, have satisfied yourself of Marmaduke’s affection—you throw me, your victim, aside, as something old, worn-out, worthless, careless of the agony you have inflicted. It is cold, cruel, innocent children like you, who do all the real mischief in this life. Do you



remember those words of Moore's? they haunt me every time I see you—

“Too bright and fair,  
To let wild passion write  
One wrong wish there.”

I believe you are incapable of loving, though so lovable in yourself.’

‘You have said enough—is it manly of you to compel me to hear such words? Surely you must have exhausted all your bitterness by this.’

“Reproach is infinite, and knows no end.” Yet of what use to reproach you. You have a heart that cannot be touched. Possibly you do not even feel regret for what you have done.’

‘Sir Mark, I entreat—I desire you to cease.’

‘You shall be obeyed; for I have finished. There is nothing more to be said. I was determined you should at least hear, and know, what you have done. Now you can go home happy in the thought that you have added one more fool to your list. Yes, I will cease. Have you anything to say?’

‘Only this; I desire you will leave my house without delay.’

My lips are white and trembling, but it is anger, not nervousness, that affects me now.

‘This moment if you wish it,’ with a short laugh.

‘No; I will have no comments made. You can easily make a reasonable excuse out of your letters to-morrow morning. After all you have said, I hope I shall never see your face again.’

‘You never shall, if it depends on me.’

‘I regret that I ever——’

‘Oh pray leave all the rest unsaid, Mrs. Carrington,’ he interrupts, bitterly, ‘I can fancy it. You regret of course you ever admitted such a fallen character within your doors; I have insulted and wounded you in every possible way. So be it. You say so, therefore it must

be true. At the same time I would have you remember, what is also true, that I would die to save you from any grief or harm. If,' sinking his voice, and speaking in a low peculiar tone, 'if you are ever in deep trouble and I can help you, think of me.'

I am impressed without knowing why. It is as though someone had laid a curse upon me. I grow as white as death, and my breath comes from me in short, quick gasps. At this moment, a deadly fear of something intangible, far-off, of something lying in the mystic future, passes over me like a cold wind.

Sir Mark raising his hat draws near. He takes my chilled gloveless hand.

'May I?' he asks humbly, and with the natural grace that belongs to him, 'it is a farewell.'

Oppressed with my nameless terror I cannot reply; I scarcely hear him; stooping, he lays his lips lightly on my hand.

The touch recalls me. With a shudder I snatch away my fingers, and, drawing back, sweep past him in eager haste to rid myself of him, and the evil fears to which his words have given rise.

I hurry on with parted lips, and trembling pulses, anxious to escape. Crossing a rustic bridge that spans a small stream at the end of the pathway, I glance instinctively backwards. He is still standing motionless on the exact spot where we parted, his arms folded, his head bare, his eyes fixed upon my retreating form. Again I shudder, and hasten out of sight.

I have said 'I will never see his face again.'

To carry out this design I determine on suffering from headache for once in my life, and by this means absent myself from dinner. Armed with this resolution, I go swiftly to my room as the early night closes in, having lingered in the gardens as long as prudence would permit.

Throwing myself upon a sofa, I summon the faith-

ful Martha, and declare myself unwell. They hardly constitute a lie these words of mine, as my temples, through excitement and uneasiness, are throbbing painfully. I feel feverish, and miserably restless, though my foolish superstition of a few hours since has resolved itself into thin air and vanished. Still how can I draw breath freely while '*that man*' continues to haunt the house?

'Dear, dear me, M'm,' says Martha, coming to the front as usual, with mournful vehemence, and an unlimited supply of remedies. 'You do look bad to be sure. You really should get advice, M'm. There is young Doctor Manley in the village, as is that clever, I do hear, as he can cure anything; and you are getting them headaches dreadful frequent. Only two days since I used a whole bottle of ody collun upon your pore forehead. But vinegar is an elegant thing, and much stronger than the ody. Shall I try it, M'm?'

'No, thank you, Martha,' I say, feeling hysterical; 'I prefer the "Ody"'; whereupon Johann Maria Farina is produced, and I am gently bathed for five minutes.

Marmaduke comes softly in.

'A headache, darling,' he says, with tender commiseration; 'that is too bad. Martha, give me the bottle. I will see to your mistress.'

'The delicatest touch possible, if you please, sir,' says Martha, warningly, who doesn't believe in men, as she leaves the room. She is dreadfully old maidish, this favourite attendant of mine, but she adores me, and with me to be loved is a necessity.

I have made up my mind to say nothing to 'Duke on the subject of Sir Mark, until the latter is well out of the house. So for the present I permit my husband to think my slight indisposition about the worst of its kind ever known.

'What can have given it to you?' he says, damping my hot brow with more than a woman's gentleness.

‘I told you, Phyllis, it was very foolish of you to venture out of doors to-day ; I hope you have not got a chill.’

‘I don’t think so. I put on very warm things. But, Marmaduke, I would not like to go down to dinner. Do you think my staying away would appear odd?’

‘Certainly not, pet. I will explain to everyone. Bed is the best place for you ; promise me you will go to sleep as soon as you can.’

‘As soon as ever I can. Oh, ’Duke, there is a quarter-past chiming, and you not dressed yet. Hurry ; it will be dreadful if neither of us can show at the proper moment.’

‘I won’t be an instant,’ says ’Duke, and scrambles through the performance with marvellous rapidity, getting down to the drawing-room before the second gong sounds.

I have accomplished my purpose, and will probably, nay certainly, not be called upon to see the dreaded features of Sir Mark again. Early to-morrow morning I trust he will be beyond recall. It never occurs to me to think what hours the trains leave Carston, which is our nearest railway station. To-morrow, too, I shall explain everything to ’Duke ; to conceal the real facts of the case from him, even for so short a time, grieves me sorely.

I begin presently to fancy what they may be saying and doing down in the dining-room ; and, so fancying, it suddenly comes to me that I am healthily and decidedly hungry. When going in for a violent headache, I certainly had not counted upon this, and laugh to myself at the trap of my own making, into which I have fallen. Ill or not ill, however, dinner I must and will have.

I ring the bell and summon Martha.

‘Well, M’m, are you anything better?’ asks that

damsel, stealing in on tip-toe, and speaking in a stage whisper.

‘I am,’ I respond, briskly, sitting up; ‘and oh, Martha, it is odd, is it not? but I do feel so awfully hungry.’

‘No, do you reelly, M’m?’ exclaims Martha, delighted; ‘that’s a rare good sign. I don’t hold with no appetite, myself. Lie down again, M’m, quiet-like, and I’ll bring you up a tray as’ll tempt you, in two minutes. A little bit of fowl now, and a slice of ‘am will be the lightest for you; and will you take Moselle, M’m, or champagne?’

‘Moselle,’ I reply, feeling something of the pleasurable excitement of long ago, when Billy used to smuggle eatables into my chamber of punishment; ‘and, Martha, if there is any orange pudding, or iced pudding, you know, you might——’

‘I’ll bring it, M’m,’ says Martha. And presently I am doing full justice to as dainty a little dinner as Martha’s love could procure.

I sleep well; but permit myself to be persuaded into staying in my room for breakfast. After that meal downstairs, Marmaduke comes tramping up to see how I am. It is eleven o’clock; surely Sir Mark can have made his excuses, and taken his departure by this time.

‘Is he gone?’ I ask in a hollow whisper, as ‘Duke enters my room.

‘Who?’

‘Mark Gore.’

‘No, not yet. Did you *know* he was going?’ Looking much surprised and seating himself on the edge of the bed.

‘I did. I *desired* him to go. Shut the door close; and I will tell you all about it. But first, ‘Duke, before I say one word, make me a vow, you will not be angry with him, or take any notice of what he has done.’

'What has he done?' demands 'Duke, growing a trifle paler.

'No harm to anyone. Make me your vow first.'

'I vow then,' says he, impatiently. And I forthwith repeat to him word for word all that passed between Sir Mark and me, in the evergreen walk.

'The scoundrel!' says 'Duke, when I have finished.

'Yes, just so,' say I. 'I really think he must have gone mad. However, there was no excuse for it, so I simply ordered him out of the house. He looked dreadfully unhappy. After all, perhaps he could not help it.'

'Duke laughs in spite of his anger, which is extreme.

'Of all the conceited little women,' he says; 'what gave you the headache last night? Was it his conduct?'

'Well, I think it was founded on a determination not to see him again. But I was afraid to tell you anything then, lest you might refuse to sit at table with him, or be uncivil, or have a row in any way. You will remember your promise, 'Duke, and let him go quietly away. An explanation would do no good. Once he is gone, it will not signify.'

'He used to be such a good fellow,' says 'Duke, in a puzzled, provoked tone.

'Well, he is anything but that now,' reply I with decision. 'If you go away now, 'Duke, I think I will get up. I daresay he will be on his way to London by the time I am dressed.'

I get through my toilette with a good deal of deliberation. I am in no great hurry to find myself downstairs; I am determined to afford him every chance of getting clear of the premises before I make my appearance.

When dressed to Martha's satisfaction, I go cautiously through the house, and, contrary to my usual custom, make straight for Marmaduke's study.

Opening the door without knocking, I find myself face to face with Marmaduke and Sir Mark Gore.

I feel petrified and somewhat guilty. Of what use my condemning myself to solitary confinement for so many hours, if the close of them only brings me in contact with what I have so striven to avoid?

Marmaduke's blue eyes are flashing, and his lips are white and compressed. Sir Mark, always dark and supercilious, is looking much the same as usual, except for a certain bitter expression that adorns the corners of his mouth. Both men regard me fixedly as I enter, but with what different feelings!

Marmaduke holds out his hand to me, and the flash dies in his eyes. Sir Mark's lips form the one word 'false.'

'No, I am not false,' I protest, vehemently, putting my hand through Marmaduke's arm, and glancing at my opponent defiantly from my shelter; 'Duke is my husband, why should I hide anything from him? I told you I would conceal nothing.'

'What charming wifely conduct,' says Sir Mark with a sneer; 'not only do you confide in him all your own little affairs, but you are ready also, at a moment's notice, to forgive him any peccadilloes of which he has been guilty.'

I feel 'Duke quiver with rage, but, laying a warning pressure on his arm, I succeed in restraining him.

'He has been guilty of none,' I cry, indignantly. 'He never cared for anyone but me, as you well know.'

Sir Mark looks down, and smiles meaningly—I reddened with anger.

'Why are you not gone?' I ask inhospitably, 'you promised you would leave early this morning.'

'Grant me a little grace, Mrs. Carrington. Had I had time I might, indeed, have ordered a special train, but as matters stand, I am compelled to be your guest, until one be allowed by the authorities to start. But for your entrance here just now, which I did not anticipate, I would not have troubled you by my

presence again, However, it is the last time you shall be so annoyed. Perhaps you will bid me good-bye, and grant me your forgiveness before I go. You at least should find it easy to pardon, as it was my unfortunate and undue admiration for yourself caused me to err.'

His tone is light and mocking, there is even a half smile upon his lips. He treats Marmaduke's presence as though he were utterly unaware of it. Yet still something beneath his sneering manner makes me know he does repent, either his false step, or its consequences.

It is with amazement I discover I bear him no ill-will. Indeed, I might almost be said to feel sorrow for him at this present moment. I shall be intensely relieved and glad when he is no longer before me; but he has been kind and pleasant to me, in many ways, during these past two months, and I forgive him. I put my hand in his, and say 'good-bye' gently. He holds it tightly for an instant, then drops it.

'Good-bye, Carrington,' he says, coolly; 'I hope when next we meet time will have softened your resentment.'

He moves towards the door with his usual careless graceful step.

'And I hope,' says 'Duke in a voice clear and quiet, yet full of suppressed passion, 'that the day we meet again is far distant. I have no desire to renew acquaintance in the future with a man who has so basely abused the rights of friendship and hospitality. You have chosen to act the part of a scoundrel. Keep to it, therefore, and avoid the society of honest men. For myself I shall endeavour to forget I ever knew anyone so contemptible.'

'Take care,' says Sir Mark, in a low fierce tone. 'Don't try me too far. "*Honest men*"! Remember one thing, Carrington—you owe me something for my forbearance.'



For a full minute the two men glare at each other, then the door is flung open, and Mark is gone.

‘What did he mean by that?’ ask I, frightened and tearful. ‘What was that he said about forbearance? Tell me, ‘Duke.’

Marmaduke’s face is white as death.

‘Nothing,’ he answers with an effort. ‘It is only a stagey way he has of speaking. Let us forget him.’

So Mark Gore drops out of our life for the present. Three days later Lady Blanche Going also takes her departure.

As we assemble in the Hall to bid her good-bye—I, from an oppressive sense of what is demanded by the laws of courtesy, the others through the dawdling idleness that belongs to a country-house—she sweeps up to me, and, with an unusually bewitching smile, says, sweetly—

‘Good-bye, dear Mrs. Carrington. Thank you so much for all your kindness to me—I really don’t remember when I have enjoyed myself so well, as here at dear old Strangemore with you.’

Here she stoops forward, as though she would press her lips to my cheek. Instantaneously dropping both her hand and my handkerchief, I bend to pick up the latter; when I raise myself again, she has wisely passed on, and so I escape the hypocritical salute.

Marmaduke puts her, maid, traps, and all, into the carriage. The door is shut, the horses start; I am well rid of another troublesome guest. I draw a deep sigh of relief as two ideas present themselves before my mind. One is, that I am better out of it all than I deserve; the second, that never again, under any circumstances, shall she enter my doors.

It is the night before Harriet’s departure, and almost all our guests have vanished. Our two military friends have resumed their regimental duties a week

ago ; Sir George Ashurst has gone to London for a little while ; Dora has decided on burying herself at Summerleas during his absence—I suppose, to meditate soberly upon the coming event.

It is nine o'clock. Dinner is a thing of the past. Even the gentlemen having tired of each other, or the wine, or the politics, have strolled into the drawing-room, and are now indulging in such light converse as they deem suitable to our feeble understandings.

Suddenly the door is flung wide, and Bébé comes hurriedly in—so hurriedly that we all refrain from speech, and raise our eyes to rivet them upon her. She is nervous—half laughing—yet evidently scared.

‘Oh, Marmaduke,’ she says, with a little gasp, and going up to him and fastening her fingers on his arm, ‘I have seen a ghost.’

‘A *what* ?’ says ‘Duke.

‘A ghost—a downright veritable ghost. Now don’t look so incredulous—I am thoroughly in earnest. I was never in my life before so frightened. I tell you I saw it plainly, and quite close. Oh ! how I ran.’

She puts her other hand to her heart, and draws a long breath.

Naturally we all stare at her, and feel interested directly. A *real* spectre is not a thing of every-day occurrence. I feel something stronger than interest ; I am terrified beyond measure, and rising from my seat, I look anxiously at ‘Duke.

‘I never heard there was a ghost here before,’ I say reproachfully. ‘Is the house haunted ? Oh, ‘Duke, you never told me of it,—and I have gone about it all hours, and sometimes even *without a light*.

I conclude there is something comical in my dismay, as Marmaduke and Lord Chandos burst out laughing ; Thornton fairly roars, while Sir James gets as near an outburst of merriment as he ever did in his life.

‘Is there a ghost in your family?’ I demand rather sharply, feeling nettled at their heartless mirth.

‘No, I am afraid we have nothing belonging to us half so respectable. All the ancestors I ever heard of died most amiably, either on the battle-field, or on the gallows, or in their beds. We cannot lay claim to a single murder, or suicide; there is not even a solitary instance of a duel being fought within these walls. I doubt we are a tame race. There is not a spark of romance about us. Bébé’s imagination has run riot.’

‘I tell you I saw it,’ persists Bébé, indignantly. ‘Am I to disbelieve my own sight? I was walking along the corridor off the picture gallery quite quietly, thinking of anything in the world but supernatural subjects, when all at once, as I got near the window, I saw a face looking in at me from the balcony outside.’

‘Oh, Bébé!’ I cry faintly, casting a nervous glance behind me, as I edge closer to Lord Chandos, who happens to be the one nearest to me.

‘It was a horrible face, wicked, but handsome. The head was covered with something dark, and it was only the eyes I noticed; they were *unearthly*—so large, and black, and revengeful; they had *murder* in them.’ Bébé stops, shuddering.

‘Really, Carrington, it is too bad of you,’ says Chips reprovingly; ‘if you keep them at all, they should at least be amiable. I wonder Miss Beatoun lives to tell the tale. Pray go on, it is positively enthralling. Did the eyes spit fire?’

‘The head vanished while I stared, and then I dropped my candle and ran downstairs, as though I were hunted. Oh! I shall never forget it.’

‘Probably some poor tramp prowling about,’ says ‘Duke, seeing I am nearly in tears.

‘It was nothing living,’ declares Miss Beatoun with a settled conviction, that sends a cold chill through my veins.

‘Bébé, how can you be so stupid?’ exclaims ‘Duke, almost provoked. ‘Ghosts indeed—I thought you had more sense. Come, let us go in a body, and exorcise this thing, whatever it is. I believe an apparition should be spoken of respectfully in capitals as *IT*. She may still be on the balcony.’

‘I think it improbable,’ says Chips; ‘she would see by the aid of Miss Beatoun’s candle that it is an unlikely spot for silver spoons.’

‘Well, if we fail, I shall give orders for a couple of men to search the shrubberies. And whatever they find, they shall bring straight to Bébé.’

‘They will find nothing,’ says Bébé with an obstinacy quite foreign to her.

I take Marmaduke’s arm, and cling to him. He looks down at me amused.

‘Why, you are trembling, you little goose. Perhaps you had better stay here.’

‘What! all alone!’ I cry, aghast, ‘never! I would be dead by the time you came back. No, I would rather see it out.’

So we all march solemnly upstairs, armed with lights, to investigate this awful mystery.

Sir James and Thornton take the lead, as I decline to separate from Marmaduke, or to go anywhere but in the middle. Not for worlds would I head the procession, and be the first to come up with what may be in store for us. With an equal horror I shrink from being last,—fearful of being grabbed by something uncanny in the background.

The whole scene is evidently an intense amusement to the men, and even Harriet, to my disgust, finds some element of the burlesque about it. The lamps upon the staircase and along the corridors throw shadows everywhere, and are not reassuring. Once, Mr. Thornton, stalking on in front, gives way to a dismal howl, and stopping short, throws himself into an attitude of abject fear, that causes me to nearly

weep, so I entreat him, in touching accents, not to do it again, without reason.

Another time, either Harriet or Bébé—who are walking close behind me (having ordered Lord Chandos to the extreme rear, as a further precaution)—lays her hand lightly on my shoulder, whereupon I shriek aloud, and precipitate myself into Marmaduke's arms.

At length we reach the dreaded spot, and Thornton, after a few whispered words with Sir James, flings up the window, and with what appears to me reckless courage, steps out upon the darksome balcony alone.

He is a long time absent. To me it seems ages. We three women stand waiting in breathless suspense. Bébé titters nervously.

'He is without doubt making a thorough examination,' says Sir James, gravely.

We strain our eyes into the night, and even as we do so, something supernaturally tall—black—gaunt—with a white plume waving from its haughty head, advances slowly towards us, from out the gloom. I feel paralysed with fright, although instinct tells me, it is not *the thing*.

'Who are ye, that come to disturb my nightly revels?' says the plumed figure, and then we all know we are gazing at Mr. Thornton, lengthened by a sweeping brush covered with a black garment, which he holds high above his head.

'Thornton, I protest you are incorrigible,' exclaims Marmaduke, when at length he can command his voice; 'and I thought better of you, James, than to aid and abet him.'

I am on the very verge of hysterics; a pinch, administered by Bébé, alone restrains me; as it is, the tears of alarm are mingling with the laughter I cannot suppress.

'My new black Cashmere wrap, I protest,' cries Harriet, pouncing upon Chips and his sweeping brush. 'Well, really, Chippendale——, and the feather

out of my best bonnet. Oh! this comes of having one's room off a balcony. Why, you wicked boy, you have been upsetting all my goods and chattels. Who gave you permission, sir, to enter my bedroom?'

'Sir James,' replies Chips demurely, who has emerged from his disguise, and is vainly trying to reduce his dishevelled locks to order. 'It was so convenient.'

'Oh, James!' says his wife, with lively reproach, 'have I lived to see you perpetrate a joke?'

'But where is the spectre?' I venture to remark.

'You must really ask Miss Beatoun,' says Chips. 'I have done my duty valiantly; no one can say I funk'd it. I have done my very best to produce a respectable *bonâ fide* boggy; and if I have failed, I am not to be blamed. Now I insist on Miss Beatoun's producing hers. We cannot possibly go back to the domestics (who, I feel positive, are cowering upon the lowest stair) empty-handed. Miss Beatoun, you have brought us all here at the peril of our lives. Now where is he?'

'It was not a man,' says Bébé.

'Then where is she?'

'I am not sure it was a woman either,' with some hesitation.

'Ye powers!' cries Chips. Then what was it—a mermaid? an undiscovered gender? The plot thickens. I shan't be able to sleep a wink to-night unless you be more explicit.'

'Then you may stay wide awake,' retorts Miss Beatoun, 'as I remember nothing but those horrid eyes. You have chosen to turn it all into ridicule; and whoever heard of a ghost appearing amidst shouts of laughter? How dreadfully cold it is! do shut that window, and let us go back to the drawing-room fire.'

'I hope your next venture will be more successful,' says Chips, meekly. And then we all troop down

again to the cosy room we have quitted, by no means wiser than when we started.

Somehow I think no more about it, and, except that I keep Martha busied in my room until I hear Marmaduke's step next door, I show no further cowardice. The general air of disbelief around me quenches my fears, and the bidding farewell to the guests I have got to like so well occupies me to the exclusion of all other matters.

Then follows Dora's wedding, a very quiet, but very charming little affair, remarkable for nothing beyond the fact, that during the inevitable breakfast speeches, my father actually contrives to squeeze out two small tears.

The happy pair start for the Continent—the bride all smiles and brown velvet and lace, the bridegroom, perhaps, a trifle pale—and we at home fall once more into our usual ways, and try to forget that Dora Vernon was ever anything but Lady Ashurst.

Marmaduke and I having decided on accepting no invitations until after Christmas, being filled with a desire to spend this season (which will be our first together) in our own home, settle down for a short time into a lazy Darby-and-Joan existence.

It is the 2nd of December, the little ormolu toy upon the mantel-piece has chimed out a quarter to five; it is almost quite dark, yet there is still a glimmer of daylight that might, perhaps, be even more pronounced but for the blazing fire within that puts it to shame.

'What a cosy little woman it is,' says 'Duke from the doorway. 'You make one hate the outer world.'

'Oh, you have come,' I cry, well pleased, 'and in time for tea. That is right. Have you taken off your shooting things. I cannot see anything distinctly where you now are.'

'I am quite clean, if you mean that,' says he,

laughing and advancing. 'I shall do no injury to your sanctum. But it is too early to go through the regular business of dressing yet.'

'Had you a good day?'

'Very good indeed, and a pleasant one altogether. Jenkins was with me, and would have come in to pay you his respects, but thought he was hardly fit for so dainty a lady's inspection. Have you been lonely, darling? How have you occupied yourself all day?'

'Very happily,' I say, surrendering one of my warm hands into his cold ones. And then I proceed to recount all the weighty affairs of business with which I have been employed during his absence.

But even as I speak the words freeze upon my lips. Between me and the dreary landscape outside rises something that chills every thought of my heart.

It is a head, closely covered with some dark clothing—the faintest outlines of a face—a pair of eyes that gleam like living coals. As I gaze horror-stricken, it disappears, so suddenly, so utterly, as to almost make me think it was a mere trick of the imagination. Almost, but not quite, the eyes still burn and gleam before me, and to my memory comes Bébé's marvellous tale.

'Duke, Duke,' I cry, rising, 'what is it? What have I seen? Oh! I am horribly frightened.' I cling to him, and point eagerly towards the window.

'Frightened at what?' asks 'Duke, startled by my manner, and gazing ignorantly in the direction I have indicated.

'A face,' I say, nervously. 'It was there only a moment ago. I saw it quite distinctly, and eyes so piercing. Marmaduke,' shrinking closer to him, 'do you remember Bébé's story?'

'My darling girl, how can you be so absurd,' exclaims 'Duke, kindly, 'letting that stupid tale upset you so. You only imagined a face, my dearest. You



have been too much alone all day. There can be nothing.'

'There was,' I declare, positively. 'I could not be so deceived.'

'Nonsense, Phyllis. Come with me to the window and look out. If there really was anyone, she must be in view still.'

He leads me to the window rather against my will, and makes me look out. I do so to please him, standing safely ensconced behind his arm.

'The lawn is bare,' says he, convincingly; 'there is no cover until one reaches the shrubberies beyond; and no one *could* have reached them since, I think. Now come with me to the other window.'

I follow him submissively with the same result; and finally we finish our researches in the bow window, at the farthest end of the room.

The prospect without is dreary in the extreme. A storm is steadily rising, and the wind is sighing mournfully through the trees. Great sullen drops of rain fall with vindictive force against the panes.

'Now confess you are the most foolish child in the world,' says Duke, cheerfully, seeing I am still depressed. 'Who would willingly be out such an evening as this! Not even a dog if he could help it; and certainly a spectre would have far too much sense.'

'If it was fancy, it was very vivid,' I say, reluctantly, 'and, besides, I am not fanciful at all. It was a little unlucky, I think; it reminded me of—of——'

'A banshee?' asks Duke, laughing.

'Well, yes, something like that,' I admit, seriously. 'Oh, Marmaduke, I hope no bad fortune is in store for us. I feel a strange foreboding at my heart.'

'You feel a good deal of folly,' says my husband. 'Phyllis, I am ashamed of you. The idea of being superstitious in the nineteenth century! I shall give you a good scolding for this, and at the same time some brandy and water. Your nerves are unstrung,

my dearest ; that is all. Come, sit down here, and try to be sensible, while I ring the bell.'

As he speaks he rings it.

'Tynon, have the grounds searched again directly. It is very annoying that tramps should be allowed the run of the place. A stop must be put to it. Half a glass of brandy and a bottle of soda.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Don't give me brandy and soda-water,' I say, with some energy. 'I do so hate it.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I tasted yours the other evening, and thought it a horrible concoction. I was tired of hearing men praise it as a drink, so thought I would try if it was really as good as they said. But it was not ; it was extremely disagreeable.'

'It was the soda you disliked. I will put very little in, and then you will like it better.'

'But, indeed, Marmaduke, I would rather not have anything.'

'But, indeed, Phyllis, I must insist on your taking it. If we are going to be so ultra-fashionable as to encourage a real ghost on the premises, we must only increase our allowance of spirits, and fortify ourselves to meet it. By the by, have you decided on the sex ? Bébé was rather hazy on that point.'

'I don't know,' I say, shuddering ; 'I wish you would not jest about it.'

Then I drink what he has prepared for me, and in spite of my dislike to it, feel presently somewhat happier in my mind.

The world is only three days older, when, as I sit alone in my own room reading, Tynon opens the door, and addresses me in the semi-mysterious manner he affects.

'There's a woman downstairs, ma'am, as particularly wants to speak with you.'

‘A woman,’ I reply, lazily; ‘what sort of a woman Tynon?’

‘Well, ma’am, a handsome woman as far as I can judge. A furriner, I would say. A woman of a fine presence—as might be a lady, but I ain’t quite certain on that point.’

‘Oh! Tynon, show her up,’ I say, hastily, feeling dismayed, as I picture to myself a lady left standing in the hall, while Tynon makes up his mind as to what her proper position in society may be.

He obeys my behest with alacrity, and in a very few moments ‘the woman’ and I are face to face; nay, as she comes slowly forward, and throws back her veil, and fixes upon me her wonderful eyes, I know, with a sinking of the heart, that I am face to face with Bébé’s ghost.

I am startled and impressed—uncomfortably impressed—as I gaze on the remains of what must once have been extraordinary beauty. I have risen on her entrance, and we now stand—my strange visitor and I—staring at each other in silence, with only the little work-table between us.

She is dressed in deepest black of a good texture—I am in rich brown velvet. She is tall and full—truly, as Tynon had described her, ‘a woman of a fine presence’—I am small and very slight. Her eyes are large and dark, and burning—such eyes as belong to the South alone—mine, large, too, are grey blue, and soft and calm.

I feel fascinated, and slightly terrified. At last I speak.

‘Is there anything I can do? I believe you wished to speak to me!’ I venture weakly, and with hesitation.

‘I do,’ says my strange visitor, never removing her piercing gaze from my face. ‘I also wished to *see* you—*close*. So you are *his* wife, are *you*? A child, a mere doll!’

I am so taken aback, I can find no reply to make to this speech; every moment renders me more amazed, more thoroughly frightened.

‘You are Mrs. Carrington of Strangemore,’ she goes on in the purest English, but with an unmistakably foreign accent—‘well, Mrs. Carrington, I have come here to-day to tell you something I fear will be unpalatable to your dainty ears.’

At this instant it occurs to me that I have admitted to my presence, and am shut up with, an escaped lunatic. At this thought my blood curdles in my veins—I move a step backwards, and cast a lingering, longing glance at the bell-handle—watching my every gesture, she immediately divines my intention.

‘If you will take my advice,’ she says, ‘you will not touch that bell. What I have to say might furnish too much gossip for your servants’ hall. No, I am *not* mad. Pouf! what a fool it is, trembling in every limb! Pray restrain yourself, Mrs. Carrington, you will require all your courage to sustain you by-and-by.’

She is speaking very insolently, and there is a fiendish triumph in her black eyes; I can hear a subtle mockery in her tone, as she utters my married name.

‘If you will be so kind as to state your business without any further delay,’ I remark, with as much hauteur as I can summon to my aid, ‘I shall feel obliged.’

‘Good,’ says she, with a vicious smile, ‘you recover. The white mouse has found its squeak. Listen then.’ She seats herself before the small table that divides us, leans her elbows upon it, and takes her face between her hands. Her eyes are still riveted upon mine, not for a second does she relax the vigilance of her gaze. ‘Who do you think I am?’ she asks, slowly.

'I have not the faintest idea,' I reply, still haughty, though thoroughly upset, and nervous.

'I — am — Marmaduke — Carrington's — lawful — wife,' she says, biting out the words with cruel emphasis, and nodding her head at me between each pause

I neither stagger, nor faint, nor cry out—I simply don't believe her. She is mad, then, after all. Oh, if Tynon, or Harris, or anyone, would only come! I calculate my chance of being able to rush past her, and gain the door in safety, but am disheartened by her watchfulness. I remember, too, how fatal a thing it is to show symptoms of terror before a maniac, and with an effort collect myself.

'If you have nothing better to say than such idiotic nonsense,' I return, calmly, 'I think this interview may as well come to an end.' As I utter this speech in fear and trembling, I once more go slowly in the direction of the bell.

'Oh! must you then see my marriage lines?' says the woman with a sneer, drawing from her bosom a folded paper. 'Is there too much of the stage about my little declaration? Come then, behold them; but at a distance, Carita, at a distance.'

She spreads open the paper upon the table before me. Impelled by some hideous curiosity I draw near. With one brown, but shapely finger, she traces the characters, and I read,—I read with dull eyes the terrible words that seal my fate. No thought of a forgery comes to soothe me; I know in that one long awful moment that my eyes have seen the truth.

Mechanically I put out my hand to seize the paper, but she pushes me roughly back.

'No, no, ma belle,' she laughs, coolly; 'not that.'

'It is a lie,' I cry fiercely; 'a lie!'

Where now is all my nervousness, my childish terror? My blood flames into life. For the time I am actually mad with passion, as mad as I imagined her a little while ago. A cruel, uncontrollable longing

to kill her—to silence for ever the bitter, mocking tones; to shut the vindictive eyes that seem to draw great drops of blood from my heart, takes possession of me. I catch hold of a heavy ruler that lies on a Davenport, near, and make a spring towards her.

But I am as an infant in the hands of my opponent; I feel myself flung violently to one side, against a wall, while the ruler falls crashing into an opposite corner.

‘Bah!’ she cries through her teeth. ‘Can English blood get warm? I did not believe it until now. So you love the handsome husband, do you? That, after all, is *not* a husband, see you, but a lover. This is *my* house, *Mees*! This is *my* room! Leave it, I command you!’

She laughs long and loudly; but all my fury has died out.

‘I do not believe one word of all your vile story,’ I declare doggedly, knowing I am lying as I speak; ‘it flavours too much of the melodrama to be real. You are an impostor; but you calculate foolishly if you think to gain money from me by your false tale. You have been seen more than once about these grounds before now——’

‘Ay’—interrupting me with a rapid shrug of her finely-formed shoulders—‘I pined, I hungered for a sight of your English baby face. I—the mistress of it all—skulked about these walls, and was hunted through your shrubberies like a common thief. Twice was I near detection; twice through my native cunning I evaded your stupid bulldogs of men. And each time I hugged myself to think I had the revenge *here*’—laying both hands lightly on her bosom, where the fatal paper once more lies.

‘I do not believe you,’ I reiterate stupidly; ‘it is nothing but a wicked invention. I am silly to feel even annoyance. My husband will soon be in; then we shall hear the truth.’

‘We shall—the whole truth. His face will betray it. Then you shall hear of the happy evenings spent in Florence, beneath the eternal blue of the sky, when Carlotta Veschi lay with her dark head reclined upon her English lover’s breast. When words of love fell hotly upon the twilight air; when vows were interchanged; when *his* lips were pressed, warmly, tenderly, to—*mine*.’

‘Be silent, woman!’ I cry, passionately, breathing hard and painfully. Oh, the anguish—the torture! I raise my head a little higher, but my hand goes out and grasps unconsciously a friendly chair to steady my failing limbs.

‘Does it distress you, Anima? all these loving details. From *his* lips they will possibly fall more sweetly. *I* am but an interloper: only the despised worm that crawls into the rose’s heart. Mine is the hand (unhappy one that I am?) to lay waste the nest of the doves.’

‘Here he is!’ I cry, joyfully, as I hear my husband’s footsteps pass the window. The very crunching of the gravel beneath his heel rouses me. Hope once again springs warm within my breast. It is not; it cannot be true. He will send this horrible woman away, and reduce all my ridiculous fears to ashes.

I run to him with unusual eagerness as he enters; and, smiling, he holds out his arms. But even before I can throw myself into them, what is it that comes across his face? What is this awful whiteness; this deadly look of terror? Why does he stagger back against the wall; why do his hands fall lifeless to his sides? Why do his eyes grow large with unearthly horror?

The woman stands where last she stood. She has not moved on his entrance, or made the faintest advance. Though slightly paler, the evil mockery still lingers in her eyes.

She raises one finger slowly, tragically, and points it at him.

‘I have found you,’ she says. ‘My—*husband!*’

No reply. Both his shaking hands go up to hide his face. I run to him, and fling my arms around his neck.

‘Marmaduke, speak!’ I cry. ‘Tell her she lies. ‘Duke, ‘Duke, raise your head, and send her from this place. Why are you silent? Why will you not look at me? It is only I—your own Phyllis. Oh, Marmaduke, I am horribly frightened. Why don’t you tell her to begone?’

‘Because he dare not,’ says my visitor, slowly. ‘Well, Marmaduke, have you no welcome for your wife?’

He puts me roughly from him, and going over to her, seizes her by the wrists, and drags her into the full light of the window.

‘You fiend!’ he hisses, beneath his breath. ‘It was all false, then, the news of your death? You are alive? You are still left to contaminate the earth? Who wrote the tidings that set me, as I believed, free?’

‘I did,’ replies the woman, quietly. ‘I was tired of you. Your milk-and-watery affection, even at the very first, sickened me. I wished to see you no more. I had begun to hate you; and so took that means of ridding myself of you for ever. But when I heard of the rich uncle’s death—of the money, the grandeur, all that had come to you, I regretted my folly, and started to claim my rights. I am here—repudiate me if you can.’

I have crept closer; I am staring at Marmaduke. I cannot, I will not, still believe.

‘Marmaduke, say she is not your wife?’ I demand, imperiously.

‘Ay, say it,’ says the woman, with a smile.

I go nearer, and attempt to take his hand.



‘Duke, say it, say it!’ I cry, feverishly.

‘Do not touch me!’ exclaims he, hoarsely, shrinking away from me.

I feel turned to stone. Not faint or sick, only numbed, and unable to reason. The Italian bursts into a ringing laugh.

‘What a situation!’ cries she. ‘What a scene! It is a tragedy, and the peasant is the heroine. I—Carlotta—am the wife, while the white, delicate, proud miladi is only the mist——’

Before the vile word can leave her lips Marmaduke’s hand is on her throat. His face is distorted with passion and madness; there is upon it a settled expression of determination that terrifies me more than all that has gone before. His thin nostrils are dilated with rage. His very lips are grey. Already the woman’s features are growing discoloured.

‘Marmaduke!’ I shriek, tearing at the hand that pinions her to the shutter, ‘Marmaduke, for *my* sake—remember—have pity. Oh! what is it you would do?’

By a superhuman effort my weak fingers succeed in dragging his hand away. He shivers, and falls back a step or two, while the Italian slowly recovers.

‘Would you murder me?’ she gasps. ‘Ah! wretch—dog—beast! But I have a revenge!’

She stalks towards the door as she utters this threat, and quickly vanishes.

I turn to my—to Marmaduke.

‘Is it true?’ I ask.

‘It is true,’ he replies, and as he speaks I can scarcely believe the man who stands before me, crushed, and aged, and heart-broken, is the same gay, handsome young man, who entered the room all smiles a few minutes ago.

‘If *she* is your wife, what am *I*?’ I ask, with unnatural calmness.

‘Phyllis! Phyllis! my life! forgive me,’ he cries, in an anguished tone; and then the room grows sud-

denly dark—I fall heavily forward into the blackness, and all is forgotten.

When I recover consciousness, I find myself in my own room, lying upon my bed. The blinds are all drawn down, to cause a soothing darkness. There is a general feel of dampness about my hair and forehead—somebody is bending anxiously over me. Raising my eyes in languid scrutiny, I discover it is my mother.

‘Is that you, mamma?’

‘Yes, my darling.’

‘I did not know you were coming to-day. How is it you are here just now? and why am I lying on my bed?’

I uplift myself upon my elbow, and peer at her curiously. Her eyelids are crimson; her voice is full of the thick and husky sound that comes of much weeping.

‘What has happened? Why am I here?’ I repeat.

‘You were not well, dearest. A mere faint, nothing more; but we thought you would feel better if kept quite quiet. I was driving over to see you to-day, and very fortunately arrived just as I was wanted. Lie down again, and try to sleep.’

‘No, I cannot. What has vexed you, mother? You have been crying.’

‘Oh no, darling,’ in trembling tones; ‘you only imagine it—perhaps it is the uncertain light.’

‘Nonsense,’ I insist, angrily; ‘you know you have. I can see it in your eyes—I can hear it in your voice. Why do you try to deceive me? Something has happened—I feel it—and you are keeping it from me. Let me think——’

With a nervous gesture mother raises a cup from a table near, and puts it to my lips.

‘Drink this first and think afterwards,’ she says; ‘it will do you good.’

‘No, I shall think first. There is something weigh-

ing on my brain, and on—my heart. Why don't you help me to remember?'

I put my hands to my head in deep perplexity. Slowly, slowly the truth comes back to me; slowly all the past horrible scene revives itself.

'Ah!' I gasp, affrightedly, 'I remember. I know it all now. I can see her again! She said—— But,' seizing mother's wrists fiercely, 'it is not true, mother? Oh, mother! say it is not true! Oh! mother! mother!'

'Phyllis, my child—my lamb! what shall I say to comfort you?'

'Deny it,' I cry, passionately, flinging my arms around her waist, and throwing back my head that I may watch her face. Poor face! so filled with the bitterest of all griefs—the want of power to solace those we love. 'Why do you cry? Why don't you say at once it was a lie? You are as bad as Marmaduke; *he* stood there too, deaf as a stick or a stone to my entreaties. Oh, will no one help me? Oh! it is true, then—it is true.'

I push her from me, and, burying my head on my arms, rock myself to and fro, in a silent agony of despair. Not a sound breaks the stillness, but mother's low suppressed sobbing; it maddens me.

'What are you crying for?' I ask, roughly, raising my tearless face; 'my eyes are dry. It is my sorrow, not yours—not anyone's. What do *you* mean by making moan?'

She makes no answer, and my head drops once more upon my arms. I continue my ceaseless, miserable rocking. Again there is silence.

A door bangs somewhere in the distance.

'I will not see him,' I cry, starting up wildly. 'Nothing on earth shall induce me. I cannot, mother. Tell him he must not come in here.'

'Darling, he is not coming. But even if he were, Phyllis, surely you would be kind to him. If you could only see his despair. He was quite innocent of

it. Phyllis, I implore you, do not foster bitter thoughts in your heart towards Marmaduke.'

'It is not that. You mistake me. Only—it is all so horrible—I fear to see him. Yesterday he was my husband—no—no—I mean I thought he was my husband; to-day what is he?'

'Oh! darling, try to be calm.'

'I am calm. See, my hand does not even tremble,' holding it up before her. 'Oh! what have I done that this should happen to me! What odious crime have I committed, that I should be so punished? Only six months married—*married*, did I say?—I must learn to forget that word.'

'Oh, Phyllis, hush! If you would but try to sleep, my poor love.'

'Shall I ever sleep again, I wonder, with that scene before me always? It has withered me. Her eyes, how they burned into mine! her very touch had venom in it. And yet why should I be so hard on her, poor creature? Was she not in the right? He is *her* husband, not mine. She has the prior claim. *She* is the deserted wife, while I am only——'

'Phyllis! Phyllis!'

'And all my life before me,' I cry, with passionate self-pity, clasping my hands, 'how shall I bear it? What are those words, mother? Do you recollect? Something beginning,—

'“So young, so young,  
I am not used to tears at night,  
Instead of slumber; nor to prayer  
With sobbing lips, and hands out-wrung.”'

'Phyllis, do you want to kill me?' says mother, her sobs breaking forth afresh.

'Poor mother, do I make you sad? Do your tears relieve you? I suppose so, as I have none. I think my sorrow is too great for that. It was like a dream, the whole thing. I could not realise it then. It is

only now I fully understand how alone I am in the world.'

'My own girl, you still have me.'

'And so I have, dear, dearest mother, but I will live alone for all that. Disgrace has fallen upon me, but I will not ask others to bear my burden. Was it not well Dora's marriage took place last month? my position cannot affect hers now.'

'Oh! Phyllis, do not talk of disgrace. What disgrace can attach to you, my poor, innocent child?'

'I cannot lie here any longer,' I say, abruptly, getting off the bed; 'I shall go mad, if I stay still and think. And—my hair,' fretfully—'it has all come down, it must be settled again. Oh! no; I cannot have Martha; she would look doleful and sympathetic, as if she knew everything, and I should feel inclined to kill her.'

'Let me do it, darling. Your arms are tired,' says mother, meekly, and proceeds to shake out and comb with softest touch the heavy masses of hair that only yesterday I gloried in. Even this morning, when it lay all about my shoulders, how happy I was!

'Do you know, mother,' I say, drearily, 'it seems to me now, as though between me and this morning a whole century had rolled?'

'Phyllis,' says mamma, earnestly, 'I don't like your manner. I don't like the way you are taking all this. A little while ago your grief was vehement, but natural, now there is an indifference about you that frightens me. You will be ill, darling, if you don't give way a little.'

'Ill? with a chance of dying, you mean? Why, that would be famous. But don't fear, mother, no such good fortune is in store for me! I shall probably outlive everyone of you.' I laugh a little. 'How nicely you use the brush, you do not drag a single hair. And it is nearly seven months now, since last you brushed my hair; and I was then almost a child, was

not I? And we never thought, you and I, such bad luck was in store for the poor little scapegrace of the family. Yes, roll it back like that. Oh! did you ever see so miserable a face? I hate it,' making a faint grimace at my own image in the glass, 'how white it is!'

'Too white?'

'Yes, but not so white as hers; and her eyes, so large and black. I have read that Italian women are revengeful. I think if she had had a knife then, she would have killed me.'

'Phyllis, you are overwrought. Darling, do let me put you into bed again, and try to swallow some of this composing draught. Or see, this comfortable couch, will you lie here?' coaxingly.

'Do you think she will come back again, mother? that would be worse than anything. She muttered some bad words, or some threat as she was leaving the room; and yet, do you know it was my hand kept Marmaduke from murdering her. Murder! Has not that an ugly sound? Poor 'Duke, he was half mad, I think!'

'Of course he was; do not let your mind dwell on it. Look what large soft cushions; only put your head on them and you will sleep. And I will tuck you up, and sing to you, and imagine you my own little baby Phyllis again.'

'But what an old, old baby! I feel as old as yourself to-day. This morning I remember I laughed for nearly five minutes without stopping, over some absurd story of Martha's. I fear I offended her at last, but I am punished now—much laughing, you know, goes before crying. Shall I cry much, later on, I wonder?'

'No, no, my love, I hope not. Come, if you will lie down here, and drink this, I will lie with you, and then you will not be lonely.'

'No, I want to walk. I feel so restless. Where is my hat, mother? Can you see it? Ah! you are not much better than Martha after all; she never knows

where anything is. How light my head feels! Do you pity me, mother—is it not hard to bear? Ah!—’ I fling my arms above my head, and fall senseless at her feet.

It is the evening of the same day; a dark sullen December evening, dark as the thoughts that throng my breast. I feel unsympathetic, cold, almost dead. Much as I have tried during these past few hours, I cannot quite reconcile myself to the idea that it is I—I myself—who am principally concerned in all this horror that has taken place.

I argue in my own mind, I represent the case as for a third person. I cannot realise that the one most to be pitied is I, Phyllis—Phyllis *what?*’

I have at length consented to see Marmaduke, and am lying upon a sofa in a hopelessly dishevelled state, as he enters. I have not shed a single tear, yet the black hollows beneath my eyes might have come from ceaseless weeping.

I half rise as he comes across the room, yet cannot raise my head to meet his gaze. I dread the havoc despair and self-torture will have wrought in his face. He moves slowly, lingeringly, until he reaches the hearth-rug, and there stands, and regards me imploringly. This I feel and know, though through some other sense besides sight.

‘Will you not even look at me?’ he says presently, in a changed, almost agonised tone.

I force my eyes to meet his, but drop them again almost immediately.

‘Is forgiveness quite out of the question?’

‘No,’ I return, ‘of course I forgive you. It was not your fault. There is nothing to forgive. But in the first instance you deceived me—that I feel the hardest.’ Even to myself, my voice sounds cold and strange.

‘I acknowledge it. But how was I to tell this

would be the end of it. It appeared impossible you should ever know the truth. It was only known to myself,—and one other——’

‘And that was——?’

‘Mark Gore. The woman, as I believed, was dead, and who could betray the secret? The whole miserable story was so hateful to me, that to repeat it to you—whom I so devotedly loved—was more than I had courage for. How could I tell you such a sickening tale? How could I watch the changes—the dislike, it might be, that would cloud your face as I related it? By your own confession, I knew you bore me none of that love that would have helped me safely through even a worse revelation, and I dreaded lest the bare liking you entertained for me should have an end, and that you, a young girl, would shrink from a widower, and the hero of such a story.’

‘Still it would have been better if you had spoken; I can forgive anything but deceit.’

‘Once or twice I tried to tell you the only secret I had from you, but you would not listen, or else at the moment spoke such words as made me doubt the expediency of ever mentioning the affair at all. But now that it is too late, I regret my duplicity, or cowardice, or whatever it was that swayed me.’

‘Too late, indeed,’ I repeat, almost mechanically.

After a minute or two, he says in a low voice—

‘Have you no interest, no curiosity, that you do not ask; will you let me tell you now all the real circumstances of the case?’

‘What need,’ I answer, wearily; ‘of course it is the old story. I seem to have heard it a hundred times. You were a boy, she was a designing woman; she entrapped you—it is the whole thing.’

‘I was no boy; I was an over-honourable man. She was an Italian woman, with some little learning, of rather respectable parentage, and who (a wonderful thing amongst her class) could speak a good deal of



English. She was handsome, and for the time I fancied I loved her. No thought of evil towards her entered my heart; I asked her to marry me, and the ceremony was performed, privately but surely, in the little chapel near her home; her brother being the principal witness. Hardly a month had passed before I fully understood the horrible mistake I had made; before I learned how detestable was the woman with whom I had linked my fate. Her coarse, harsh manner; her vile insolent tongue; her habits of drunkenness; nay more, her evident preference for a low illiterate cousin, were all too apparent. I left her; she declaring herself as glad to see the last of me, as I was to be rid of her. Does the whole think disgust you, Phyllis?’

He pauses, and draws his hand wearily across his forehead.

I shake my head, but make no further reply; and presently he goes on again in a low tone.

‘I was, comparative speaking, poor then; yet, out of the allowance my uncle made me, I sent her regularly as much, indeed more, than I could afford; but dread of discovery forced me to be generous. Then one day came the tidings of her death. Even now, Phyllis—now, when I am utterly crushed and heart-broken—I can feel again the wild passion of delight that overcame me, as I pictured myself once more free. Again I mixed with the world I had for some time avoided, and was received with open arms, my uncle’s death having made me a rich man, and then—then I met you. Oh, Phyllis! surely my story is a sad one, and deserving of some pity.’

‘It is sad,’ I say, monotonously, ‘but not so sad as mine.’

Coming over, he kneels down beside my sofa, and gently, almost fearfully, takes one of my hands in both his.

‘Oh, not so sad as yours, my poor love, my own darling,’ he murmurs, painfully, ‘but still unhappy

enough. To think that I, who would willingly have shielded you with my life, should be the one to bring misery upon you.'

He hides his face upon the far edge of the cushion, on which my aching head is reclining. I can no longer see him, but can feel his whole frame trembling with suppressed emotion. With some far-off, indistinct sensation of pity, I press the hand that still holds by mine.

Presently I rouse myself, and rising into a sitting posture, I fix my dull eyes upon the opposite wall, and speak—

'I suppose it is to my old home I must go.'

As though the words stung him, Marmaduke gets up impetuously, and walks back to his former position upon the hearth-rug. I notice that his face has grown, if possible, a shade paler than before. A sudden look of fear has overspread it.

'Yes, yes, of course you shall go home for a little time if you wish it,' he says, nervously.

'Not for a little time—for ever,' I return. A horrible pain is tugging at my heart.

'Phyllis,' cries he, almost fiercely, 'what are you saying? you cannot mean it. For ever! Do you know what that means? If you can live without me, I tell you plainly, I would rather ten thousand times be dead, than exist without you. Are you utterly heartless, that you can torture me like this? Never to see you again, is that what you would say?' Coming nearer, so close that he touches me, while his eyes seek and read with desperate eagerness my face—'Speak, speak, and tell me you were only trying to frighten me.'

'I cannot, I mean just what I said,' I gasp, consumed by a sudden dread of I scarce know what. 'Why do you disbelieve? what other course is open to me?'

'Listen,' trying to speak calmly, and seizing hold of my hands again; 'why should you make this wretched

story public? As yet, no one is the wiser; you and I alone hold the secret. This woman, this *fiend*, will go anywhere, will do anything for sufficient money, and I can make it worth her while to be for ever silent;—when she returns to Italy, who then will know the truth?’

‘The truth—ah! yes——’

‘Are you not my wife? Has not my love bound you to me by stronger ties than any church laws? Why should this former detested bond ruin both our lives?’

‘A little while ago you spoke of yourself as an “over-honourable” man. Is what you now propose honourable or right? Marmaduke, it is impossible. As our lives have shaped themselves, so must they be. I cannot live with you.’

‘Think of what the world will say. Phyllis, can you bear their cruel speeches? It is not altogether for my own sake I plead, though the very thought of losing you is more than I can bear. It is for you, yourself, I entreat; remember what your position will be. Have pity upon yourself.’

‘No, no, I will not listen to you. I will not, Marmaduke.’

He flings himself on his knees before me.

‘Darling, darling, do not forsake me,’ he whispers, despairingly.

‘Let me go,’ I cry, wildly. ‘Is this your love for me? Oh, the selfishness of it. Would you have me live with you as——’

‘Be silent!’ exclaims he, in a terrible voice. A spasm of pain contracts his face. Slowly he regains his feet.

‘You madden me,’ he goes on, in an altered tone. ‘I forget that you, who have never loved, cannot feel as I do. Phyllis, tell me the truth, have you no affection for me? Are you quite cold?’

‘I am not!’ I cry, suddenly, waking from my un-

natural apathy, and bursting into bitter tears, the first I have shed to-day. As the whole horrible truth comes home to me, I rise impulsively, and fling myself into my husband's arms—for my husband he has been for six long months. 'I do love you, 'Duke—'Duke; but oh! what can I do? What words can I use to tell you all I feel? I am young, and silly, and ridiculous in many ways, I know; but yet there is something within me I dare not disobey; something that makes me know the life you propose would be a life of sin, one on which no blessing could fall. Help me, therefore, to do the right, and do not make my despair greater than it is.'

He is silent, as he holds me clasped passionately to his breast.

'We must part,' I go on, more steadily. 'I must leave you; but, oh! 'Duke, do not send me home. I could not go there.'

I shudder violently in his embrace at the bare thought of such a home-coming. How could I summon courage to meet all the whispers, the suppressed looks, the very kindnesses, that day by day I should see?

'And here I could not stay, either,' I sob, mournfully; 'memory would kill me. 'Duke, where shall I go? Send me, you—somewhere.'

I wait for his answer with my head pillowed on his chest. I wait a long time. Whatever struggle is going on within him takes place silently. He makes no sign of agony; he does not move; his very heart, on which I lean, has almost ceased to beat. At length he speaks, and as the words cross his lips I know that he has conquered, but at the expense of youth, and joy, and hope.

'There is Hazleton,' he says; 'it is a pretty place. It was my mother's. Will you go there? And——'

'Yes, I will go there,' I answer, brokenly.

'What servants will you take with you?' he asks me presently, in a dull, subdued way; all impatience and passion have died within him.

‘I will take none,’ I reply, ‘not one from this place. You must go to Hazleton and get me a few from the neighbourhood round it. Just three or four, who will know nothing of me, and seek to know nothing.’

‘Oh, my darling! at least take your own maid with you, who has known you all your life. And Tynon, he is an old and valued servant; he will watch over you, and take care of you.’

‘I will not be watched,’ I say, pettishly; ‘and I detest being taken care of. I am not ill. Even when a heart is sick unto death, there is no cure for it. And I would not have Tynon on any account. Every time I met his eyes I would know what he was thinking about. I would read pity in every glance and gesture, and I will not be made more wretched than I am by sympathy.’

‘Then take Martha. You know how attached to you she is——’

‘No; I will have no one to remind me of the old life. Do not urge me,’ Duke. ‘Give me my own way in this. Believe me, if you do, I shall have a far better chance of—peace.’

‘I wish, for your sake, I was dead,’ says ‘Duke, hoarsely.

At this I begin to cry again, weakly—I am almost worn out.

‘You will at least write to me, now and then, Phyllis?’

‘It will be better not.’

‘Why? I have sworn not to see you again, but I must and will have some means of knowing whether you are dead or alive. Promise me that twice a year, once in every six months, you will let me have a letter. It is only a little thing to ask, out of all the happy past.’

‘I promise. But you—will you stay here?’

‘Here?’ he echoes, bitterly; ‘what do you take me for? In this house, where every room, and book,

and flower, would remind me of your sweet presence? No, we will leave it together; I shall look my last on it with you. I will not stay to see it desolate, and grey, and cold, without its mistress. You must let me be your escort to your new home, that people may have less to wonder at.'

'And where will you go?'

'Abroad—India, Australia, America, anywhere, what does it matter? If I travelled to the ends of the earth, I could not fly my thoughts.'

'And—' timidly, 'what of *her*?'

'Nothing,' he answers, roughly; 'I will not talk of her again to *you*.'

There is a low, apologetic knock at the door. Instantly I seat myself on the sofa in as dignified an attitude as I can assume, considering my hair is all awry, and my eyelids crimson. 'Duke lowers the lamp prudently, and falls back to the hearth-rug, standing with his hands clasped carelessly behind him, before he says in a clear distinct tone—

'Come in.'

'Dinner is served,' announces Tynon, softly, with the vaguest, discreetest of coughs. How is it that servants always know everything?

'Very good,' returns Marmaduke in his ordinary voice. 'Let Mrs. Vernon know.' Then, as though acting on a second thought—

'Tynon.'

'Yes, sir.'

'It may be as well to let you know now that Mrs. Carrington and I are leaving home next week for some time.'

'Indeed, sir? yes, sir.' Tynon's face is perfectly impassive, except at the extreme corners of the mouth; these being slightly down-drawn indicate regret, and some distress.

'We both feel much disappointed at being obliged to leave home at this particular time, the Christmas

season being so close at hand, but the business that takes us is important, and will admit of no delay. I shall leave behind me the usual sum of money for the poor, with an additional gift from Mrs. Carrington, which I will trust you and Mrs. Benson (the house-keeper) to see properly distributed.'

'Thank you, sir; it shall be carefully attended to.'

'I am quite sure of that,' kindly. Then with a return to the rather forced and stilted manner that has distinguished his foregoing speech, he goes on: 'It is altogether uncertain when we shall be able to come back to Strangemore, as the business of which I speak will necessitate my going abroad; as Mrs. Carrington's health will not allow her to accompany me, and as she has been ordered change of air, she will go to Hazleton, which she has not seen, and await my return there. You quite understand, Tynon?'

'Perfectly, sir,' replies the old butler, with his eyes on the ground. And as I watch him, I know how perfectly indeed he understands, not only what is being said, but also what is not being said.

'Duke, weary of lying, draws his hand across his forehead, 'You will please let the other servants know of our movements; although my absence may be more prolonged than I think, I shall wish them all to remain as they now are, so that the house may be in readiness to receive us at any moment. But,' turning his gaze for the first time fully upon Tynon, and speaking very sternly, 'I will have no whispering or gossiping about things that don't concern them, mind that. I leave you in charge, Tynon, and I desire that all such conduct be punished with instant dismissal—you hear?'

'Yes, sir, you may be sure there shall be no gossiping or whispering going on in this house.'

'I hope not.' Then, having noticed the quavering voice and depressed air of this old servitor, who has

known him from his youth up, he adds more gently, 'You may go now. I know I can trust you. I do not think I have any more directions to give you at present.'

Tynon bows in a shaky, dispirited way, and leaves the room; outside, in the dusk of the corridor, I can see him put his hand to his eyes. But he is staunch, and even now compels himself to turn and say with deference, and with a praiseworthy show of ignorance of what the preceding conversation may mean—

'I hope you will excuse my mentioning it, sir, but if there is one thing beyond another, that raises Mrs. Cook's irritableness, and makes her perverse towards the rest of the household, it is to hear the soup was allowed to grow cold.'

'All right, Tynon, Mrs. Harrison's nerves shall not be upset this evening; we will go down now,' says 'Duke with a smile—a very impoverished specimen of its kind I must own, but still a smile.

I rush into the next room (my dressing-room is off my boudoir), and having bathed my poor eyes, and hastily brushed my hair, and given myself a general air of prosperity, make for the dining-room. On the stairs we encounter mother, looking so pale, and wan, and almost terrified, that I take my hand off Marmaduke's arm, and slip it round her waist. It will never do for her to present such a woful countenance to the criticism of servants.

'Try to look a little more cheerful, darling,' I whisper, eagerly, 'it will not be for long; as it has to be gone through, let us be brave in the doing of it.'

She looks at me with a relieved astonishment, and truly the strength of will that bears me through this interminable evening amazes no one so much as myself.

Hazleton down by the sea, I have gained your shelter at last. Only yesterday, Marmaduke and I



finished our miserable journey here, and took a long, a last, farewell of one another.

How can I write of it, how describe the anguish of those few minutes, in which a whole year's keenest torture was compressed? How paint word by word the mad, but hopeless clinging, the lingering touch of hands that never more should join, the despair, the passion of the final embrace?

It is over, and he is gone, and I have fallen into a settled state of apathy, and indifference to what is going on around me, that surely bears some resemblance to a melancholy madness.

Hazleton is a very pretty, old-fashioned house about half the size of Strangemore—with many straggling rooms well wainscoted almost three parts up each wall. Some of the floors are of gleaming polished oak, some richly, heavily carpeted; it is a picturesque old place, that at any other time, and under any other circumstances, would have filled me with admiration.

Afar off one can catch a glimpse of the sea. From the parlour windows it is plainly visible, in the other rooms a rising hill, and in summer the foliage, intercept the view. In reality, it is only a mile and a half distant from the house, so that at night when the wind is high, the sullen roar of it comes to the listening ear.

The few servants who have had the house in charge have been retained, three more have been added. These have evidently made up their minds to receive me with open arms, but as a week passes, and I show no signs of interest in them or their work, or the gardens, or anything connected with my life, they are clearly puzzled and disappointed. This I notice in a dull wondering fashion. Why can they not be as indifferent to me as I am to them?

All the visitors that should call, do call—it is not a populous neighbourhood, but as I decline seeing them, and do not return their visits, the would-be acquaint-

ance drops. On Monday, the vicar, a slight intellectual-looking man, rides up to the door, and being refused admittance leaves his card, and expresses his intention of coming again some day soon. Which message being conveyed to me by the respectable person who reigns here as butler, raises my ire, and induces me to give an order on the spot, that never, on any pretence, whatever, is anyone—vicar or no vicar—to be admitted to my presence.

Sunday comes, but I feel no inclination to clothe myself, and go forth to confess my sins, and pour out my griefs in the house of prayer. All days are alike to me, and I shrink with a morbid horror from presenting myself to the eyes of my fellows. In this quiet retreat I can bury myself, and nurse my wrongs, and brood over my troubles without interference from a cruel world.

I find some half-finished work amongst my things, and taking it to my favourite room, bend over it hour by hour; more often it falls unheeded on my lap, while I let memory wander backward, and ask myself sadly, if such a being ever really lived as wild, merry, careless Phyllis Vernon.

The days go by, and I feel no wish for outdoor exercise. My colour slowly fades.

One morning, the woman who has taken Martha's place, and who finds much apparent delight in the binding and twisting of my hair into impossible fashions, takes courage to address me.

'The gardens here, ma'am, are so pretty, the prettiest for miles round.'

'Are they? I must go and see them.'

'Deed, m'm, and it would do you good. A smart walk now, once in a way, is better'n med'cin, so I'm told. And the grounds round here is rare and pretty to look at, though to be sure winter has a dispiritin' effect on everything.'

'It is cold,' I say, with a shiver.

‘It is, m’m, surely,’—leaving the mighty edifice she is erecting on the top of my head to give the fire a vigorous poke—‘but with your fur cloak and hat you won’t feel it. Shall I bring them to you after breakfast, ma’am?’

‘Very well, do,’ reply I, with a sigh of resignation.

Much pleased with her success, the damsel retreats, and, punctually to the moment, as I rise from my breakfast table, appears again armed with cloak, and gloves, and hat. Thus constrained I sally forth, and make a tour round the gardens that surround what must be for evermore my home.

And very delicious old gardens they are, as old-fashioned as the house, and quite as picturesque. There is a total want of method, of precision in the arrangement of them, that instinctively charms the eyes. I wander from orchard into flower-garden, and from flower-garden on again to orchard, without a break of any sort; no gates divide them; it is all one pretty happy medley.

The walks, though scrupulously neat, are ungravelled, and here and there a dead leaf, crisp and dry, displays itself. The very trees, though bereft of leaves, do not appear so foolish, so melancholy in this free land of theirs, as they always look elsewhere.

I feel some animation creeping into my blood, my step is more springy; at the garden gate the father of all this sweetness steps up to me. He is a rosy-cheeked, good-humoured looking man, a brilliant contrast to the unapproachable Cummins; he presents me with a small bouquet of winter flowers.

‘I am proud to see you, ma’am,’ he says, with a touch of interest in his tone. ‘I am sorry I have nothing better worth offering you than these’ere.’ He tenders the bouquet as he speaks—a very marvel of a bouquet, considering the time of year.

‘Thank you,’ I say, with a gracious smile, born of my brisk and pleasant promenade, ‘it is lovely. It is

far prettier in my eyes than a summer one, because so unexpected.'

I pass on, leaving him, bowing and scraping and much gratified, in the middle of the path, with the unwonted smile still upon my lips.

But as evening draws on, this faintest glimmer of renewed hope dies, and I sink back once more into my accustomed gloom.

'What will you please to order for dinner to-day, mum?' asks cook from the doorway. I have never yet given directions for that meal, much to this worthy creature's despair, whose heart and thoughts are in her stewpans.

I glance up with languid surprise.

'Anything you please,' I say; 'you are always very satisfactory. I told you I would leave everything to you. Why do you ask me to-day in particular?'

'Law, mum, sure it's Christmas Day, and I thought maybe as 'ow——'

'Christmas Day, is it?' I exclaim, curiously; 'then I have been a whole fortnight in this place.'

'Yes, mum. A whole fortnight and one day, by five o'clock this hevening, precisely. I took the liberty of asking you to order dinner for this one night, thinking as you might put a name to something or other dainty that you fancies.'

'Indeed, I have no choice, cook, and I am not at all hungry.'

'Likely enough, mum, considering it is now only twelve o'clock; but for a lady like yourself as eats no luncheon to speak of, you will for certain be starved by seven.'

'I thought a Christmas dinner never varied, cook. You can have the usual thing, I suppose.'

'In course, mum,' says cook, undaunted. She is a fine, fat, healthy-looking woman, with a large eye, and a slightly wheezy intonation, as though she were con-

stantly trying to swallow some of her own good things that had inadvertently stuck in her throat. It seems to me that I ought to love this comfortable creature, who is so obstinately bent on fattening me against my will.—‘But, whatever folks may say, a plum-pudding for a delicate lady like you is uncommon ’eavy on the ’art and mind, when bed-hour comes. If you would just say anything that would please you—something light that I might try my hand on—an ice-pudding now?’—this with as near an attempt at coaxing as respect will permit.

But the word ‘ice-pudding’ calls up old memories; I remember my ancient weakness for that particular confection—my brows contract; a sharp pain fills my breast.

‘No, no, anything but ice-pudding,’ I say, hastily, ‘I—hate it.’

‘Dear me, mum, now do you? Most of the quality loves it. Then what would you say—I’m a first-class hand in the pastry line——’

‘Make me—a meringue,’ I murmur, in despair, seeing I shall have to give in, or else go through a list from the cookery book, and fortunately remembering how I once heard a clever housekeeper say there were few sweets so difficult to bring to perfection. But the difficulty, if there is any, only enchants my goddess of the range.

‘Very good, mum, you shall ’ave it,’ she says, rapturously; and retires with flying colours, having beaten me ignominiously.

A month—two months—go by, and still my self-imposed seclusion is unbroken.

Now and again I receive a letter from former friends, but these I discourage. From mother I hear regularly once a week, whether I answer her or not. Poor mother! she has begged and prayed for permission to visit me, to see how time is using me, whether I am well or ill; but all to no avail. I will not be dragged

out of the gloomy solitude in which I have chosen to bury myself.

From Dora, on her return from Rome, comes such a kindly, tender letter, as I had not believed it possible the chilly Dora could pen. It is wound up by a post-script from Sir George, as warm-hearted in tone as he is himself. It touches me—in a far-off, curious manner—but I shrink from the invitation to join them that it contains, and refuse it in such a way as must prevent a repetition of it.

Monotonous as is my existence, I hardly note how time flies. March winds rush by me, and I scarcely heed them. But for the hurtful racking cough they leave me as a legacy, ere taking their final departure, I would not have known they had been amongst us. This cough grows and increases steadily, rendering more pallid my already colourless cheeks, while the little flesh that still cleaves to my bones becomes less and less as the hours go on. It tears my slight frame with a cruel force, and leaves me sleepless when all the rest of the world is wrapped in slumber.

Oh! the weary days, the more than weary nights, when oblivion never comes to drown my thoughts; or, coming, only wraps me in dreams from which I wake, damply cold, or sobbing with a horror too deep for words.

There are times when I fight with fate, with all that has brought me to this pass; when I cry aloud and wring my hands, and call on Death to rescue me, in the privacy of my own room, from the misery that weighs me down, and keeps me languishing in the dust. But these times are rare, and come to me but seldom—at such weak moments as when a feeling of deadly sickness or overpowering regret gains mastery over me.

In very truth my life is a sad one—a mistake!—a blot!—there is no proper place for me in the universe that seems so great. There is no happiness within me; no spring of hope. I appear to myself a thing apart;

innocent, yet marked with a disgraceful brand. With an old writer—whom I now forget—I can truly say,

‘For the world, I count it not an inn, but an hospital; and a place not to live, but to die in.’

At last I awake to the fact that I am ill—dreadfully ill. There can be no doubt of it; and yet my malady has no name. I have lost all appetite; my strength has deserted me; great hollows have grown in my cheeks, above which my eyes gleam large and feverish. When I sit down, I feel no desire to rise again.

Towards the middle of April I rally a little, and an intense craving for air is ever on me. Down by the sea I wander daily, getting as close to it as my strength will allow, the mile that separates me from it being now looked upon as a journey by my impoverished strength. Somewhat nearer to me than the shore is a high level plain of sand and earth and grass, that runs back inland from a precipice that overlooks the ocean. On this I sit, and, drawing sometimes up to the edge, peer over, and amuse myself counting the waves as they dash on to the beach far, far below.

This plain, forming part of the grounds belonging to Hazleton, possesses the double charm of being easier of access than the strand, and of being strictly private.

It is the 17th of April—a cold day, but fresh, with little sunshine anywhere. I am sauntering along my usual path to my sandy plain, thoughtless of anything in the present, innocent of presentiments, when, suddenly, before me, as though arisen out of the earth, stands Sir Mark Gore.

How long is it since last I saw him?—not months, surely?—it seems more like yesterday. Why do I feel no surprise, no emotion; is the mind within me indeed dead? I am more puzzled by my own unnatural calmness at this moment, than even by an event so unexpected as his presence here.

We both stand still and gaze at each other. As far as I am concerned, time dies—I forget these weary

months at Hazleton. I think of our parting at Strangemore. His eyes are reading, examining with undisguised pain, the changes in my face and form. At length he speaks—

‘I hardly thought to meet you here, Mrs. Carrington,’ he says, advancing, and addressing me in the low hushed tone one adopts towards the sick or dying. He appears agitated.

I regard him with a fixed coldness.

‘You, who know all,’ I say with quiet emphasis, ‘why do you call me by that name? Call me Phyllis, that, at least, still remains to me.’

He flushes crimson, and a pained look comes into his eyes.

‘I suppose,’ I go on curiously, ‘that last warning you gave Marmaduke at the library door at home—at Strangemore,’ correcting myself without haste, ‘had reference to—that woman? Am I right?’

‘Yes, I regret now having ever uttered it.’

‘Regrets are useless, and your words did no harm. Thinking of things since, I knew they must have meant an allusion to her.’

‘How calmly you speak of it,’ he says, amazed.

‘I speak as I feel,’ I reply.

There is rather an awkward pause. Now that he is here, the question naturally presents itself—for what reason has he come? At length—

‘Will you not say you are glad to see me,’ ventures Sir Mark, uneasily.

‘I am neither glad nor sorry,’ is my unmoved return; ‘I have forgotten to be emotional. I believe my real feeling just now is indifference. Considering how unlooked-for is your presence here, it astonishes even myself that I can call up so little surprise. Curious, is it not? You look thin, I think, and older—not so well as when last we met.’

He grows a shade paler.

‘Do I?’ Then, drawing a hard quick breath—‘and



you, child, what have you been doing with yourself? Except for your eyes, it is hardly you I see. So white, so worn, so changed—this place is killing you.'

'It is a very quiet place. It suits me better than any other could.'

'I tell you it is killing you,' he repeats, angrily. 'Better to face and endure the world's talk at once, than linger here until body and soul part.'

'I shall never face the world,' return I, quietly. 'Here is my convent; at least, within its walls I find peace. I see no one, therefore hear no evil talk. I have no wish to be disturbed.'

'So you think now; but as time goes on you must—you cannot fail to tire of it. Is it natural, to one so young, to lock herself voluntarily away from people of her own age? Why—how old are you, child?'

'Almost nineteen.'

'Almost nineteen!' cries he, with an unmirthful laugh, 'and you may live for fifty years. Are you going to immure yourself within these same four walls for fifty years?'

'I shall not live for fifty years.'

'But you may; without excitement of any description, I see no reason why you should not live for a century.'

'I shall not live for two years,' return I, impressively.

'Phyllis, what are you saying?' cries he, with a shudder.

'The truth—I am dying slowly, and I know it. I am glad of it. I have no energy, no hope, no wish for life. Do you wonder much? At times I have a strange fancy that I am already dead; and then——' I break off, dreamily.

'What an abominable morbid fancy! it is horrible,' exclaims Sir Mark, excitedly. 'You must see a doctor without delay; if you were well no such mournful ideas would occur to you.'

‘Mournful!’ I smile a little. ‘Yes, perhaps so, —when I wake again to find I am alive.’

‘Nonsense,’ impatiently. ‘Why have your people left you so much alone? It is shameful, unheard of. Phyllis, promise me you will see a doctor if I send one.’

‘Who shall minister to a mind diseased?’ say I, still smiling. ‘No, I will not see your doctor. My ailment has no name; I do not suffer—quiet is my best medicine.’

We walk on a little way in silence.

‘You do not ask after your friends,’ says he, abruptly.

‘Have I still any left? Well, tell me. I should like to know—how is Marmaduke? and where?’

‘Do you not hear from him, then,’ turning to gaze suspiciously in my face.

‘No; why should I? We parted for ever when he brought me here. Oh!’ with a sudden sharp uplifting of my voice—‘how long ago it seems; what years, and years, and years. Tell me, you—where is he?’

‘Abroad somewhere; we none of us know where. You think of him incessantly?’ still with his eyes searching and reading my face; ‘it is for him the colour has left your cheeks—the light has died from your eyes? Is it the old life, or is it merely him you regret?’

‘I think I regret nothing but my youth,’ return I, wearily.

‘Had you never, at any time, any idea of the truth?’ asks he in a low tone, presently.

‘Never. How should I? He kept it from me, fearing it would cause me pain.’

‘He deceived you grossly.’

‘Yes; but as he thought, for my good. Where was the use of enlightening me? The story was told; the woman was dead—or so he believed. He chose to hide it from me.’

‘Yes, he hid it from you.’

‘Well! what of that?’ I cry, impatiently; ‘it was a mistake, I think, but a kindly one. He was always thinking of my happiness. It was, perhaps, a worse shock to him than it was to me. He had no faintest thought of her being alive until she stood before him.’

He is silent. Something in his manner, in the very way he keeps his eyes bent resolutely upon the ground, chills me. Upon his face a curiously determined expression has gathered and grown.

‘No faintest thought,’ I repeat, sharply, watching him now as keenly as he watched me before, ‘of course he had not. He had heard of her death years before he ever met me. Had he even doubted on the subject his treachery would have been unequalled. But you cannot think that; it is impossible you can think it—therefore say so!’

Still he is silent—ominously so, as it seems to me. His eyes are still downcast; the evil determination in his face is stronger; his cane is digging deep furrows in the sandy loam.

‘Why don’t you speak?’ cry I, fiercely; ‘what do you mean by standing there silent, with that hateful expression upon your face? Do you mean to insinuate that there was a doubt in his mind? Look at me, and answer truly: Do you believe Marmaduke knew that woman to be living when he married me?’

I am half mad with suspense and fear. Placing both my hands upon his arm, I put forth all my puny strength and actually compel him, strong man as he is, to meet my gaze.

For a moment he hesitates—a long moment—and then the right triumphs. Though in his own mind he is firmly convinced that can he but endue my mind with this doubt of Marmaduke’s integrity, it will substantially aid his own cause, still, being a gentleman born and bred, he finds a difficulty in bringing his lips to utter the miserable falsehood.

‘No ; I don’t believe he did know,’ he answers, doggedly.

‘You are sure of this?’ I ask, feverishly.

‘I would give my oath of it,’ he replies, with increased sullenness.

‘Coward!’ murmur I, bitterly, taking my hands from his arm, and turning away.

The excitement of the past few minutes has been terrible to my weakened frame, I feel a vague dizziness—a coldness creeping over me. I am a good half-mile from home; should I faint, there will be nothing for it but for Sir Mark to carry me there, and to have that man’s arms round me for so long a time is more than I could endure. The bare thought of it nerves me to action.

Hurriedly drawing a pin from some secret fold of my dress, I press it deep into my arm, so deep that presently I feel a warm sluggish drop ooze out, and trickle slowly down my flesh, until it sinks into the lining of my sleeve. The little dull pain that follows rouses me, and puts an end to all fear of my becoming insensible.

I draw a long breath, and gradually awaken to the fact that my companion is again speaking.

‘In spite of all that, he has wronged you horribly,’ he is saying, with much deliberation. ‘What has he made you? A woman without a name—one whom the virtuous world would not recognise. He has driven you to bury yourself in this remote corner of the earth, cut off from all that makes life acceptable. He has destroyed your youth, and ruined your health; this is all you have to thank him for.’

‘The undeniable truth of your words renders them all the more pleasing,’ I say, bitterly. ‘Have you come all the way down here to tell me what I know so well already?’

‘Yes, and for something more, to ask you to be my wife. Hush! let me speak. I know the answer you

would make me, but I do not think you have fully weighed everything. Were you to endure this life you are now leading but for a season, for a year, even several years—I would say nothing; but until this woman, this Carlotta, dies, you can never be his wife. Remember that. And who ever knew anyone to die quickly, whose death was longed for? Look at annuitants, for instance, they live for ever—therefore this isolation of yours will know no end.'

I am motionless, speechless, from rage and amazement.

'Then, by your own words and actions,' he goes on in the same measured fashion, suppressing forcibly the fire and agitation that lies beneath his cold exterior, 'I have seen a hundred times how little real affection you entertain for Carrington; therefore you are not bound to him by the ties of love. Will you not consider for your own sake? I offer you my name, my rank, everything that I possess. Few men would be tempted to do as much perhaps.'

'Sir,' say I, feeling half choked, 'believe me I fully appreciate all the sacrifices you would make for my sake. Pray spare both me and yourself the recital of them.'

'Sacrifices?' interrupts he, eagerly; 'no, indeed! I never thought of it in that light. I only meant to put the case clearly before you exactly as it is, without any false lights. I tell you that so far from my present proposition to you being a sacrifice on my part, I would gladly go on my knees to you this moment, if by doing so I could gain your consent to my plans. I will take you to any part of the world you may choose to name, at home or abroad. I shall be prouder, more blest than I can say, if you will consent to be my wife.'

'Have you quite done?' say I, in a tone treacherously calm. 'Have you anything more to say? No? Are you sure? Now listen to me. Even if the circumstances were totally different—if I were free as air

—if you were the last man on earth, I would not marry you. Whether I do, or do not love Marmaduke, is a question I decline to answer to you. At all events, to my own way of thinking, I am his wife now, and shall ever remain so—until death divides us. But as to whether or not I love you, I feel no hesitation about answering that. I look upon you as the lowest, the meanest of men, to come here behind your friend's back to traduce him, and insinuate lies about him, so as to do him injury in the eyes of the woman he loves. I loathe and detest you, with all my heart.'

I am staring him valiantly in the face, as I utter these denunciations. My cheeks are crimson with rage—my eyes are flashing—for the moment all my old strength, and more than my old spirit, has returned to me. I have worked myself through the force of my eloquence into such a passion, that I literally tremble from head to foot. I feel humbled and insulted in my own eyes. All these months of lonely weariness have failed to bring home to me the fact that I am not a married woman. This man's complete acceptance of it has maddened me.

'Thank you,' says he, slowly, 'but pray do not stop yet. There must be something more you wish to say. Don't mind me—don't take my feelings into consideration.'

'I don't,' I reply, viciously stamping my foot. 'But as it happens, I have said all I ever wish to say to you. You may take from my lips now the very last words I shall condescend to utter to you. Leave me; I hate and despise you!'

'I will,' cries he, furiously, losing sight of all the self-imposed restraint that has bound him during the last fifteen minutes. 'But I shall take something else too. As you decree, we shall part here never to meet again. I shall at least kiss you in farewell, for the insolence you have shown me.'

His face is full of anger and settled purpose; he is

white to the lips—his eyes gleam steadily. There is no sign of wavering or relenting about him.

Oh! how I regret my intemperate speech. An awful fear seizes hold of me. I can almost fancy his committing murder with that look in his eyes. I forget all but a wild desire to escape, and breaking from him, I rush madly towards the bare unwall'd cliff that overhangs the sea.

But a very little space divides me from the edge as his hand catches and closes on my arm, and drags me roughly backwards.

‘Are you mad?’ he pants, hoarsely, all the passion gone from his face, leaving only cold horror in its place. ‘Are you out of your senses? Come home directly. What! would you prefer death to a kiss from me? At last you have effectually put an end to my absurd infatuation. I have no great fancy for any woman’s loathing.’

So saying he leads me homewards, tired, worn-out, with conflicting emotions. His hand still clutches my arm, as though he fears I will again break loose, and try to accomplish my wicked purpose.

Silent and obedient I go with him, until we reach the small gate by which I generally leave and return.

Here he stops, and putting me inside, shuts the wicket again between us, he being on the outside.

‘Now go home,’ he says, sternly, ‘and get to bed, you are as white as death—do you hear me?’

I answer ‘yes,’ very meekly, feeling somehow frightened and subdued.

‘As I shall take very good care not to put myself in your way again,’ he goes on in the same tone, ‘I would wish to say before leaving, that in the future when you stigmatise me, mean and dishonourable, I would have you also remember, that to-day I came to do you the kindest turn any man could do you under the circumstances.’

After this remark, without further glance or gesture, he turns and leaves me.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

DURING many days that follow, I lie prostrate, weak as a little child, upon my bed. The shock, the thoughts he has called up, the sure and certain knowledge he has imparted to me, of how that part of the world that knows all my sad story, regards my position, has done much to destroy the poor remains of life and hope that still cling to me almost unconsciously.

A fresh cold has again attacked me, and brought on with increased vigour my old cough. By the middle of May, I am a complete wreck of my once buoyant self.

Rising one Sabbath morning with a curious awe, some sense of coming dissolution upon me, I put on my out-door things, and slowly crawl, rather than walk, the little way that separates me from the rustic, ivy-covered church.

The sexton, all prying eyes and gaping mouth, shows me, heavily veiled as I am, into the Carrington pew, guessing instinctively, though he has never seen me, that the strange Lady of Hazleton has at last given in, and confessed a craving for spiritual consolation.

I kneel and pray as in a dream. The voices of the village choir rise up around me, yet scarcely enter my dulled ear. The Litany, with all its grandeur, all its solemn beauty, fails to impress my sickened soul.

I sit alone, apart, my veil drawn down, my hands clasped upon my knees, turning neither to the right nor left, dimly conscious that the sermon I hear so coldly, is far beyond the average of those usually served up to the congregations of remote, almost forgotten country towns.

When it is over, and my neighbours have well



departed, I move down the aisle, and make my way down again to my hermitage, unmoved, unsoftened, by all I have heard and seen.

After the mockery called lunch is at an end, I go to my chosen sitting-room, and getting into the window that overlooks a small inlet of the sea, sit down to my incessant musing.

Presently, far off through the house, comes the sound of impatient knocking. I cannot hear distinctly, so thick are the ancient oaken doors that divide me from the hall; but that it is a double knock I feel small doubt.

This thought, so foreign, being forced upon me, after quite six months of perfect isolation, raises a nervousness that is near akin to fear, within my breast. I wait in palpitating expectancy for what is to follow. Perhaps the vicar, emboldened by my appearance in his church, has determined to strike while the iron, in his opinion, must be hot, and has ridden over to try and gain access to the one hardened sinner who disgraces his parish! Many conjectures rush through my mind, but this takes root. It must be so.

Steps in the hall. Is it possible the man has admitted him on his own responsibility against my orders, or has he forced his way, setting his duty before him as an excuse for his impertinence?

Steps up the stairs, along the passage—steps almost at the door.

I spring to my feet, and push back my chair. Who is it? Who is it I hear? I move still farther into the window, I clutch the curtains to steady myself, I put both my hands up to my head, to stifle the wild sob that rises in my throat.

Nearer, nearer! I lean against the window shutters, and am trembling like one in ague from head to foot, as the door opens, and Marmaduke comes in.

Our eyes meet, and then of a sudden, a great calm falls upon me!

'She is dead,' says he, wearily, and flings himself into the chair near which he is standing. He makes no attempt to come nearer to me, to touch me, after that first long eager glance.

As for me, I cannot utter even one poor word. Am I glad? Am I sorry? Am I half mad with joy at the very sight of him? or am I altogether indifferent? I hardly know.

'She is dead.' The words keep ringing in my ears. My brain echoes them. 'She is dead—dead!'

A clammy moisture, cold and weak, covers my face. My hands fall to my sides lifeless.

'Not,' I stammer, 'not, you did not!'

'Murder her?' supplies he with a bitter laugh. 'No, though I could have done so with a good will, I refrained from that. When I reached her she was lying shrouded in her coffin.'

'When did she die?' I ask, 'and how?'

'In Florence, a fortnight ago, of some malignant fever. I have come here with as little delay as possible to tell you of it.'

I glance at him curiously. It is not the old Marmaduke who has come back to me. He is travel-stained, worn and thin. His voice has lost its old ring, his eye its brightness. There is something dejected in his very attitude.

Such a meeting, after such a parting! I marvel at it inwardly, though conscious I would not have it otherwise.

Alas! how wrongly things have gone with us during our brief married life, from beginning to end! Is it, indeed, true that when the mist and rain arise to blot our hopes, nor time nor vengeance can suffice to make existence quite the same again?

'How can I tell that she is really dead?' say I, moodily; 'you deceived me once. Perhaps some day she will come to life again to defy and torture me.'

‘I do not think you have any right to speak to me in this way,’ replies he, quietly. ‘I may have deceived you passively once in my life by forbearing to mention what would do no good in the telling, and might have caused you grief, or, at least, unpleasantness. But to you or any other being I have never lied. I saw the woman dead with my own eyes. I attended her funeral. I did not think proofs necessary, but if you require it I can produce a witness.’

He pauses calmly for a reply, being utterly passionless in his manner, but I give him none. I am still wondering at the change in him—the change in myself.

‘You will not believe me guilty of falsehood in such a case,’ he says. ‘You surely must see I am speaking the truth.’

‘I suppose so,’ I murmur at length. ‘Poor woman! She did not long outlive her revenge.’ I sigh heavily, and my head droops. My thin white fingers clasp and unclasp each other aimlessly. My thoughts are so indistinct I can put them into no shape. The light falls upon my bent figure, my slight shrunken form.

‘Phyllis!’ cries Marmaduke, springing to his feet with a sudden, sharp change of tone, ‘how white you are, how emaciated; how altered in every way! Have you been ill? Oh, my darling!’ with a groan, ‘I have ruined your life, and broken your heart; have I destroyed your health also?’

He makes an impetuous movement towards me, as though he would catch me in his arms.

‘Don’t do that,’ I cry, hastily, shrinking farther into the recess of the window; ‘do not touch me. Remember you are not—my husband.’

He stops short, and his eager arms fall empty to his sides. His face grows a shade paler.

‘True,’ he says in a low voice, ‘I had forgotten that; you do well to remind me. Fortunately it is a matter that can soon be put right.’

‘Is it?’ I question, coldly. ‘Can anything that

has once gone wrong in this world, ever be put right again, I wonder?’

‘This can at all events,’ regarding me closely. We must be married again here, and without delay. The few who know our wretched story can be our witnesses, and no one beyond need be a bit the wiser.’

‘You forget that walls have ears, and that one’s sin must always find one out.’

‘There was no premeditated sin in this case, and’—speaking somewhat curtly—‘I do not believe we have been found out. On my way through London coming down here, I sounded a few of my acquaintances on the subject, and all seemed ignorant of the real cause of our separation. However, that is an outside question altogether. The principal thing now is to put oneself beyond the reach of scandal. When will you wish the ceremony, Phyllis? Next week? I fear, this being Friday, it will be impossible to arrange it sooner. You will want some of your friends with you.’

He is calm again, but is now watching me narrowly.

‘I don’t know,’ I say, deliberately, ‘whether I shall consent to a second marriage. I have grown accustomed to my present life; solitude suits me. Now, I am free; then——’

I have scarcely, I think, rightly calculated the full effect of my words. Striding forward, Marmaduke seizes me by both arms, and turning, forces me to meet his gaze.

‘What are you saying?’ he cries, fiercely. ‘What folly is this? Do you know that for all these past months I have been half mad, when thinking of the blight I have brought upon your honour; and are you so insensible to it that you can hesitate about accepting this one only way of redeeming it? Your dislike to me must have grown indeed, if at such a time you can shrink from taking my name.’

‘You misunderstand me. I only shrink from changing my present calm mode of living.’

‘Do you know what the world will do, when sooner or later it finds out the truth?—as it surely will. Do you know it will cut you, avoid you, wound you in every possible way?’

‘Why should I care?’ I interrupt, recklessly. ‘All these months I have done without companionship; there is no reason why in the future I should feel the want of it. Besides, they must see it is through no fault of mine that things have so arranged themselves.’

‘The world will never be content with the true version of the story. It will not rest without adding to it such false outlines as shall serve to render it more palatable to its scandal-loving ears. You must be indeed ignorant of its ways if you can imagine otherwise. It will ask why, when the obstacle was happily removed, I did not then marry you? What answer will you make to that?’

‘Who will question me? If I shut myself away from everyone, how shall I be affected by the surmises of society?’

‘You talk like a foolish child, and like a very selfish one. Am I unworthy of any consideration? How shall I bear to look on while society vilifies you to its heart’s content, and leaves you without a rag of reputation? You in your present position—a woman without a name—would have as much chance of admission within your own circle as the veriest Pariah that could be produced. I will not listen to your folly. Even if you hate me, I shall insist upon your marrying me.’

‘How can you insist?’ I ask, almost angrily. There is a wild, unsettled throbbing at my heart that puzzles me. I scarcely know what it is I would, or would not wish. All these past months of bitter maddening thought and unbroken loneliness have crushed the life within my breast, and dulled my intellect. ‘You have no claim upon me.’

‘No,’ in a changed, softened voice. ‘I cannot,

indeed, insist, but I can plead—not for myself, Phyllis, but for you. I have put the case before you truthfully, and now entreat you to become my wife, before the real reason for our separation gets abroad. I offer you my name alone. Once having put you in possession of that, I swear I will rid you of my presence for ever if you wish it. Will that content you? Why should the idea be so repugnant to you? unless, indeed——’

Here he pauses. A deep, red, passionate flush suffuses his face. Placing his hands heavily upon my shoulders, he once more compels me to meet his eyes.

‘Unless, indeed, you wish to hold yourself free for another! If I thought that—if during my absence you had seen anyone else, who——’

‘Oh, yes!’ I interrupt, bitterly; ‘that is so likely. My married life has been so pleasant—such a prosperous one—that, doubtless, I am in a hurry to try it again. No; believe me, I have fixed my affections on no one during your absence. You are quite safe there. I am as heart-whole as when you left me. I feel no wild desire to throw myself into the arms of any man.’

He draws a long, deep breath.

‘I would kill you,’ he says, slowly, ‘if for one moment I doubted your truth.’

‘I am hardly worth the killing,’ return I, with a little, faint, chill smile, looking upon my wasted hands and fragile figure as it reflects itself in an opposite mirror. ‘Why do you want me so much? I have always been more of a torment to you than a joy, and now I have lost even those few poor little charms I may once have thought I possessed. Ice itself cannot be colder than the woman you wish for the second time to make your own. Why will you not take the chance of escape I offer?’ He makes a movement of impatience. ‘You are unwise in letting it slip. What can you see in me to love?’

‘Just what I always saw in you to love. I cannot

change. To me, you are my wife—the most precious thing on earth. I will not give you up.’

‘And you saw her lying dead?’ I say, irrelevantly.

‘Yes. Have I not told you so already? Why name her to me?’

‘Poor soul! How strange she must have looked,’ I say, dreamily, ‘lying there with those restless, burning eyes for ever closed. So cold, so white, so still. And you looked down upon her. You were glad to see her there,’ with a shudder. ‘You rejoiced that death had stepped in to conquer her, and free you of a chain that dragged. It is a dreadful picture.’

‘A very natural one, I think. Glad? Yes, I was glad. I was more than that: I was deeply thankful to see her there, powerless to work her wicked will, or pollute the world again. I think—I hope I forgave her; but I was glad to see her dead.’

There is a pause. Weary of standing, I sink into a chair. I push back my hair from my forehead, which has begun to throb a good deal, and then let my hands fall listlessly into my lap.

Kneeling down beside me, he takes one of them gently, and strokes it. While he does so, I examine him critically. He has grown more like himself by this time, and but for the hollows in his cheeks, and that his moustache is somewhat darker and longer, I see no great alteration. Verily, he has emerged from the fight unscathed, and triumphant in comparison with me.

‘Tell me your real objection to my proposal,’ he says, softly.

‘Does my disinclination to be re-married so much surprise you?’ I ask, slowly and gravely. ‘Until I saw you I was a light-hearted child’—I feel that now by force of contrast, though often then I fancied myself ill-used—‘I did not know the meaning of real pain, of bitter, enduring shame—that cruellest of all heart-aches. You enlightened me.’

‘Phyllis—my love—spare me!’

‘Here, in this quiet spot, I am at peace. My life is going from me slowly: I have little strength left; do not urge me against my will to enter again into the turmoil and troubles of every-day existence.’

‘Oh, my darling! don’t speak so hopelessly. The melancholy of your life has caused you to exaggerate the evils of your state. Change of air and a good doctor will do wonders for you. Only do not waste time. Delay is often fatal. Phyllis, think of your mother. For her sake, promise to marry me again next Monday.’

‘Very well, you shall have your way,’ I return, fairly beaten by his vehemence and determination.

‘That is wise, that is sensible!’ he says, eagerly. ‘Any other course you adopted could only be suggested by weak and morbid sentiments. Everything later on shall be as you wish. I will go back to London by the night mail to arrange matters. So let me know now any things you may require. What friends as witnesses, for instance.’

‘Harriet and Bébé, I suppose; and Dora and George Ashurst. That will be sufficient, will it not?’

‘Your mother?’

‘Mamma? Oh, no—oh, no!’ I cry, weeping. ‘Not mamma. She dressed me for my first wedding—I will not have her now. We would both be thinking of that all the time, and it would break her heart. But go to her, and tell her everything. She may find some consolation in your tidings.’

‘I will go to her to-morrow,’ he whispers, soothingly. ‘Afterwards I may go on to Strangemore. Can I bring you anything from there?’

‘Send me Martha. I would like to have her with me again.’

‘I will. Phyllis, my dear, dear girl, why do you cry so bitterly? Of what are you thinking? Surely you must see that I am only acting for the best. If I



consented to what you propose I would deserve the name of blackguard; no term would be too harsh to apply to me. Sooner or later, darling, you will acknowledge this, and thank me for my firmness.'

'I suppose so,' making a violent effort to suppress my sobs. 'I am only weak and nervous. Your coming was so unexpected; you should have warned me. And I have been so quiet here. Remember you have promised that I shall not be disturbed afterwards. You will still leave me to myself. I am fit for nothing else. Oh, this pain—this faintness! Will you ring the bell, and get me a glass of wine?'

He receives me as I totter feebly forwards, and lays me on my couch with the utmost tenderness, and a good deal of trepidation.

Then he rings the bell, and as the man enters gives the order for the wine in the old, clear, quick voice, that seems to me to belong so entirely to Strangemore as to be out of place in this other home.

Not until I am quite recovered, and apparently little the worse for my faintness, does he take his leave; gently kissing my hands, with the assurance that he will be back again with the friends I have expressed a wish for, on the coming Sabbath, he quits the house as quietly as he entered it.

On the Sunday, about the middle of the day, Harriet and Bébé arrive. Dora and George Ashurst follow them in time for dinner. I can see they are all more or less shocked at the changes that have taken place in my appearance, though they refrain from saying so.

Bébé lays herself out to amuse and rouse me by retailing to my languid ears all the most secret gossip and raciest pieces of scandal from the London world, bit by bit, as it occurs to her.

Lord Harry has been at P—— again, and was well received there, in spite of all that has come and gone.

Lord Augustus was jilted by Miss Glanville. George Brooks found the air of Monaco didn't agree with him, and was obliged to exchange into another and less desirable regiment, to see what time and India would do for him. The Duke has made a wretched match in the eyes of the world. But she is awfully good to look at, and he appears provokingly content and happy.

'And he really should not do that, you know,' says Bébé; 'it isn't good form to be in such high spirits with the tide of popular opinion so dead against you. To see them in the theatre is immense fun. (I don't believe she ever saw one until she married him, and came to town.) He sitting beside her and explaining everything, she all big eyes and pleasurable excitement. His delight in her delight is quite pretty.'

Lady Blanche Going has had measles, much to her own disgust and Bébé's enjoyment.

'And how is Chandos?' I ask, presently.

'How can I tell you, my dear, when I see so little of him. He has been making a grand tour somewhere, and raking up old bones, we hear; but the "where" is wrapped in mystery. Jericho, most probably; it would just suit his dismal disposition.'

She speaks heartlessly, but her low, broad forehead wrinkles ever such a little.

'I hope, wherever he is, he will come back safely,' I say kindly, ignoring her manner. 'I liked him so much. To me he never appeared dismal. And your Chips, what of him?'

'Ah! my poor Chips! He sailed for India a month ago. Such a leave-taking as we had. It would have melted an Amazon. I assure you I very nearly wept, and I certainly kissed him. So did Harriet—twice—who was on the spot doing propriety. I thought that was taking an unfair advantage of me. And he is to shoot every tiger in Bengal, and to send me the skins. At long last I shall be embarrassed by my riches.'

After dinner, as we are all assembled in the drawing-

room, we become aware of some noise that strongly resembles a scuffle in the hall. It is followed by the sudden opening of the door, and the apparition of Martha on the threshold, flushed with victory, and with her bonnet artistically awry.

Seeing me lying on my sofa, she loses all presence of mind (of which her stock was always small), and, regardless of beholders, rushes forward, and precipitates herself at my feet.

‘Oh, Miss Phyllis! Oh, ma’am!’ says she, with a lamentable sniff and a nice forgetfulness of manners, as she takes note of my leanness, ‘Oh, Miss Phyllis! my dear, my dear! How terrible bad you do look, to be shore!’

Here she falls to, kissing and weeping over my hand, finally breaking into loud sobs.

The old spinster appellation, suiting as it does my present position so neatly—albeit unmeant by my faithful handmaiden—raises within me a grim sense of amusement. I check it, however, as being unfit for present company.

‘Nonsense, Martha,’ I say, kindly; ‘don’t go on like that. I daresay now you have come to take care of me. I shall recover my beauty. I shall feel quite insulted if you cry over me any more.’

‘Martha, come with me,’ says Bébé, with authority; and Martha, being like all the good ones of her class, instinctively obedient, rises, and leaves the room close at Miss Beatoun’s heels.

‘What a dreadful habit those people have of giving way to their feelings on every possible occasion!’ exclaims the usually serene Harriet, wrathfully, as the door closes, coming to my side, to shake up my pillows, and get rid of her irritation.

‘Really, yes, it is very distressing,’ chimes in Dora, from the depths of the large arm-chair, in which her small figure is almost lost; she speaks as it behoves a pretty baroness to speak, who now for the first time is

made aware of some of the grosser habits of the lower classes. Her tone is perfect—having just the correct amount of surprise and disapproval—no more. ‘And yet that woman always used to strike me as being such a very properly conducted sort of person.’

‘Don’t be so hard on her, Harry,’ say I. ‘Remember she has known me all my life, and has had the care of me ever since I was an infant. She loves me: do not condemn her for that love.’

‘I was wrong, of course,’ confesses Harriet remorsefully. ‘Such attachment being rare, should be considered beautiful. I apologise to your Martha. But I was thinking, not of her darling, but of you. I did so dread she would excite you over-much, and to-morrow will be such a trying day. Now lie back again, dear, and keep silence while we chat to you.’

It is still the morning of my second wedding-day, though a few minutes since I heard some clock chime the quarter to twelve. Habited in the darkest gown my wardrobe can produce, I go down stairs slowly, as in a dream, to the drawing-room, where I find them all assembled before me.

They all glance at me as I enter, and seem relieved on perceiving the total lack of nervousness exhibited by my features. Indeed, it occurs even to myself that I am the only one present thoroughly unimpressed.

Marmaduke is looking pale, but composed, George Ashurst painfully anxious; but that is only what might be expected of him. The others are all more or less evidently desirous of getting it over in a hurry, and appearing at their ease, in which they fail. The priest, a stranger to me, seems curious.

Bébé comes forward, and taking my hand, leads me before the impromptu altar; Marmaduke steps to my side, and his old college chum commences the service. I have obstinately refused to be re-married by the vicar at home.

Bébé dexterously draws off the wedding ring—that has never yet left my finger since first it was placed there—and thoughtfully hands it to 'Duke. With a shudder he flings it from him into the glowing fire, where it vanishes for ever with a faint, tinkling noise.

'Not that,' he mutters in a low tone, and brings out a new one from his pocket.

In a clear voice, utterly devoid of emotion, I answer all the responses. Marmaduke's voice shakes a good deal, and I turn and look at him, surprised. He has had my hand in a warm, close clasp from the moment the prayer-book was opened, and now, too, I notice how he trembles, as for the second time he binds me to him with the little golden emblem of eternity.

Although their voices reach my outward ears; although I myself say what is required of me with perfect calmness, I do not really hear or heed one word of the ceremony. Thoughts, frivolous and unworthy of the solemnity of the occasion, flit through my brain. I cannot fix my attention on any one thing. I feel no desire to do so.

I wonder vaguely whether, were a widow going to be married again, she would feel as indifferent as I do; then I recollect how, in her case, the bridegroom at least would be a new feature, which would, without doubt, add a little zest to the affair.

How pretty Dora is looking in that navy blue silk and cashmere costume, wonderfully pretty and timid; but then everything always did become Dora.

How nervous that good George appears, and how ridiculously red—why he might almost be painted.

Oh! I have ordered no wedding breakfast. Only fancy! a wedding without a wedding breakfast! How could I have been so remiss! They will all think me terribly stupid. I almost confess aloud this negligence on my part, so little do I heed the sacred words that are falling on the air; but fortunately some still remaining sense of propriety restrains me.

The service is nearly at an end ; once more Marmaduke Carrington and I are man and wife. It only waits for the few last sentences to be read.

Looking up, I catch Bébé's eyes. Why are they so wet ? And how large they are—how large—why do they grow, and gleam, and burn into mine, like—like—Ah !

I wrench my hand from Marmaduke, and turning towards George Ashurst fling up my arms somewhat wildly.

‘Save—save me !’ I gasp.

In another moment he has caught me, and I am lying senseless on his breast.

When I come to myself I find them all around me, though most of them stand at a little distance from the sofa. The strange clergyman has vanished ; no doubt horrified at such unorthodox behaviour.

Marmaduke, with folded arms, is stationed rather apart from the others, biting his lips, and making a violent effort to conceal his fear and emotion.

‘Are you better, darling ?’ asks Bébé, whose arm is under my head, while Dora, supplied with a smelling-bottle, leans over me at the other side—the very sweetest picture of misery.

‘I am,’ I return, feebly ; ‘I don’t know what made me so foolish. I did not feel nervous ; but I was unlike myself all the morning.’

‘Poor child !’ says Harriet, and down come Dora’s tiny fingers, wet with eau-de-Cologne, upon my forehead.

‘I shall be all right in a minute or two,’ I go on, smiling as I regain strength. ‘It was too bad of me to frighten you all so much. In the middle of it, I suddenly recollected I had forgotten to order you any breakfast, and the horror of the thought must have been too much for me. I grow nervous and fanciful in my old age. But I am all right again now.’

The day wears on ; my wedding guests have had

their lunch, and are now in the drawing-room, bidding me farewell before starting for the train that is to bear them away from the newly-married couple. How strange, how difficult to comprehend, it all appears!

Dora kisses me with a good deal more than her usual warmth. For once, her pretty show of sympathy is quite sincere. I think at this moment, seeing me so sick, and languid, and devoid of all the old unrestrainable joyousness, she, for the first time, altogether forgives me my misdoings. George kisses me, too, heartily, and murmurs a few confused congratulatory words. Even to his thick brain it has become apparent how strangely apathetic and indifferent is the bride.

‘The Continent is the place for you, Phyllis,’ he says; ‘anyone can see that with half an eye. Get Carrington to take you there without delay.’

I smile faintly, but make no rejoinder.

‘Good-bye, darling,’ whispers my Bébé, stooping over me, and rubbing her cheek with a little purring motion to mine. ‘Be a good child, and let Marmaduke pet you to his heart’s content. You want an overdose now you have been so long alone.’

At length they are all gone, leaving the house to fall back into its old silence and calm. All, that is, except Marmaduke, who lingers purposely.

‘There is no reason,’ he says, in answer to my inquiring look, ‘why all those people should know so soon the terms on which we have arranged to live. By degrees it can make itself known.’

I lie idly thinking, idly putting together in my mind the strange story of my life. Once looking up, I catch his gaze intently fixed upon me. Twice, three times, I meet it, and then growing irritable through exhaustion and excitement, I say pettishly,

‘Why do you look at me so? I hate being stared at. One would imagine I had more heads than one. Is my appearance so very grotesque, Marmaduke?’

‘Was I staring?’ he asks, absently, and drawing

out his watch examines it anxiously, and then commences a slow promenade up and down the room. He appears distrait, impatient. His eyes are now turned towards the window that overlooks the avenue. It is as though he were expectant of someone's arrival.

'If you are not going until the next train,' I remark, snubbily, 'you have two full hours to wait; therefore you need hardly calculate minutes so soon. That is the eighth time you have examined your watch within the past ten minutes.' Certainly I am not in my most amiable mood.

'I am not returning to London to-night,' he says, calmly; 'I daresay I can get a bed at that place in the village.'

'Surely, considering this is your own house, you need not throw yourself on the mercy of the parish for a bed. Martha will see about a room for you.'

'It is your house, not mine. I made you a present of it when—some time ago. However,' quickly, 'if you invite me, I shall gladly put up here.'

Turning his face to the window and away from me, he goes on rapidly—

'To tell you the truth, Phyllis, the chief reason for my staying here now is this: I made an appointment with Sir James Smithson to meet me in this house at four o'clock, to—to take a look at you, and tell me his opinion—as to your state of health.'

'Sir James Smithson!' I cry, angrily. 'Do you mean to tell me you have brought a doctor to torment me, and make me miserable? This is what comes of marrying you. Oh! why was I so weak as to give in to your wishes! I won't see him—you may be sure of that.'

'My darling, be reasonable,' with the humblest entreaty. 'It will only be for a few minutes. Directly he sees you, he will know the very thing that will set you up again—there is not, there cannot be anything seriously wrong with you. Good advice is all you require. Why will you insist on—on——'



‘Dying,’ I put in, flippantly; ‘why don’t you say it? I shan’t go to my grave a moment sooner through your mentioning the unpleasant word.’

‘You will see him, Phyllis?’

‘Oh, if he is really coming, I suppose I must. But I warn you, I shall take no nasty stuffs, politely called tonics, and I will not go abroad.’

In this amiable frame of mind I prepare myself to receive the great London doctor. As the servant ushers him into my room, I rise and bow, and am much relieved at finding myself in the presence of a small, homely, jolly-looking little man, with none of the signs of greatness about him.

He examines my chest, and asks a question or two that would certainly suggest themselves to an idiot. He thumps me here and pats me there—hums and haws, and finally says I want ‘tone.’

‘And change of air, my dear Mrs. Carrington. A little pleasure trip now—just a little run through all the oldspots we know so well—and then a winter at Pau; or even a degree farther south is all that we want, eh?’

‘I will take your tonics,’ I say, giving in so far, ‘but,’ determinately, ‘I will not take change of air. I am happy here; I will not leave it.’

‘Dear, dear,’ ejaculates Sir James, soothingly, giving me another tap—‘how people differ! Most young ladies, now, would do almost anything for me, if I would only order them to Pau. Such a lively place, my dear Mrs. Carrington, so invigorating, so gay; just the very thing for a woman so young, and, let me add, so very charming, as yourself. Now pray do reconsider it.’

I laugh, and glance at myself in an opposite mirror. A white face, lean jaws, large unnatural eyes, and pallid lips meet my view. I am altogether unlovely.

‘I shall get well enough here,’ I say, obstinately. ‘You may order me every nasty concoction you can

think of, and I will promise you to drink and eat them all, but go from Hazleton I will not.'

'Well, well; we shall see how you get on,' replies Sir James, cajolingly, patting my hand. He deals in pats and gentle reassuring nods, but he is a dear old man, and I feel some faint regret that he should leave thinking me unreasonable. He does leave me, however, presently, and seeks my husband, doubtless to pour into his ears all the unpalatable things he is too gallant to say to me.

No more is said to me on the subject. I have evidently conquered. Marmaduke returns to London, taking a run down every now and then to see how I am getting on. I am not getting on at all. I am simply stationary, and am no whit more beautiful to behold than when first his astonished eyes fell upon me, now more than a month ago.

I have wandered listlessly down by the sea. It is a dreary day, raw, chill, unsummerlike. I shiver vaguely as I go, and wish the night would come to bring us nearer to a more congenial day. All around is mist, and cheerless damp. Grey sky, grey earth, grey clouds that cover land and sea; and oh! grey shadow lying on my heart, how grey art thou!

I feel more than ordinarily depressed and weary. The tide is far out, hardly a breath of wind disturbs the surface of the waters. Seating myself upon a flat rock I open my book and commence to read.

But my thoughts will not be controlled. Raising my eyes I look seaward, and wonder at the great pale mist that spreads itself north and south. The horizon sinks into the ocean, and veils of vapoury substance are everywhere.

I sigh, and turning dejectedly from the unvarying scene before me, discover Marmaduke coming towards me across the sands.

'What a curious light!' he says, without greeting

of any kind, and sits down upon the pebbles at my feet.

‘Very,’ I answer, stupidly, and then begin to wonder vaguely what has brought him to-day from the busy town, and who has betrayed my favourite hiding-place.

Presently, unconsciously I sigh again, and turn my face from his.

‘What is it?’ asks he, kindly taking my hand, not affectionately, merely reassuringly. ‘Tell me the truth now, to-day. Is it that you hate me?’

‘I hardly know,’ I return, wearily. ‘No; it is not hatred, I think; it is indifference.’

We rise, and pace silently homewards.

It is the evening of the same day. My depression of the morning has vanished, leaving a spirit of provocation in its place. I am in the drawing-room, lounging idly in a low cushioned chair, with Fifi, my pet Skye, in my lap. I amuse myself, and gratify the wickedness within me, by practising upon the long-suffering animal such mild torments as disturb without maddening her.

Duke, under the impression that there is a fire in the grate, stands with his back to the fireplace, and stares at me.

‘I wish,’ he remarks, presently, without premeditation, ‘you could be induced to take Sir James’s advice, and seek change of air. This solitary hole must have a bad effect upon your health.’

‘I have borne the solitude for so many months, that I daresay I can bear it again. Though, indeed,’ mischievously, ‘I had company at times. I could actually have been married, had I so chosen.’

‘What!’ says Marmaduke, in a low tone, flushing.

‘I could have been married, had I so chosen,’ I repeat, with much gusto. ‘Why do you look so surprised? I was free, was I not? There was no reason, then, why I should not listen to any man’s proposal.’

‘What do you mean, Phyllis?’ sternly.

‘Just what I say. A friend of ours, who is aware of all the circumstances of our case, came here one day, and made me a handsome offer of his hand, and what he is pleased to term his heart.’

‘Did Gore come down here to see you?’

‘Not so much for that, as to ask me to marry him.’

‘The scoundrel!’ says ‘Duke, through his closed teeth.

‘Why should you call him that? On the contrary, there was something generous in his wish to bestow his name upon a woman situated as I was. (No, no, Fifine, you must not lick me. Kiss me, if you will, but keep your little tongue in its proper place.) Few men would have done it, I fancy. At all events, it convinced me of the truth and sincerity of his affection for me.’

‘If you saw so many admirable points in his character, why did you let such a valuable chance of securing them go by?’ he asks, bitterly. He is white with anger by this time. I see his emotion, but, being fiendishly inclined at the moment, know no remorse.

‘One does do a foolish thing now and again,’ I reply, calmly, curling Fifine’s silky locks the wrong way, to her infinite disgust. ‘Afterwards, when it is too late, one repents.’

‘Am I to understand you repent not having bound yourself for life to that unmitigated villain?’

I burst out laughing.

‘Poor Sir Mark!’ I cry. ‘“A scoundrel! a villain!” What next? He tried to do the best he could for me, and gets only abuse in return. Do I repent not having married him? Well—no. At that time I was not particularly in love with matrimony. I had no desire to form new ties—*now*, indeed——’

I break off in pretended confusion. My head bends itself a little on one side. I gaze down consciously into Fifine’s lustrous eyes.

'Phyllis,' says my husband, with suppressed indignation, 'whatever you may really mean by your words, I must beg that for the future I may hear no more of it; I——'

But here the horrible pain in my side comes back to me with its usual acute energy, and mischief fades from me. I push Ffine from my lap, and half rise.

'If you are going to be tragical,' I say, 'I hope you will leave me. I care neither for Sir Mark Gore, nor for any other man, as you ought to know. Oh, my side!' I gasp, pressing my hand to it, and becoming colourless.

My breath and voice fail me. In a moment his kind arms are round me. My head falls helpless on his shoulder, as though I were a mere child (and, indeed, I am little more in his strong grasp, now sickness has reduced me). He carries me to a sofa, and does for me all that can be done, until the first unbearable anguish is past. Then, with his arm under my head, so as to raise me, he sits waiting in silent watchfulness until rest and ease return.

'You're not rid of me yet,' I whisper, with a faint mocking smile, as I notice the fear and misery in his face. 'Don't look so wo-begone.'

Suddenly he falls on his knees beside my couch, though still supporting me.

'I can't bear it any longer,' he says, passionately. 'Darling! darling! why will you kill yourself? How can I watch you dying by inches? Have pity for me, if you have none for yourself, and save me from going mad. Phyllis, dearest!' controlling himself by an effort, and trying to speak more calmly, 'why can you not look upon me as a cousin, or brother, or father, and let me take you abroad to some place where you can get change of air and scene, and where I may at least be near enough to protect you and see that you want for nothing.'

'My *father*!' return I, with an amused laugh;

‘just compare yourself with papa; think of the inhuman length of his nose. I am afraid it would not do. The world, simple as it has ever shown itself, would hardly accept you in that light. You grow younger and fresher every day. It is wonderful how little the agony of your mind preys upon your body.’

‘Phyllis,’ regardless of this taunt, ‘let me take you to the South of France.’

‘Oh, why can’t I be let alone?’ I cry pettishly. ‘Why am I to be tormented every hour of the day? I hate dirty, foreign towns; and besides, I know all the journeys I could take would do me no good; but, if I am to get no peace until I consent to leave the only place that pleases me, I may as well do so at once. I will go back to Strangemore.’

‘You mean it, darling?’ cautiously, and without evincing too much joy, lest in my pettishness I should repent, and go back of my words.

‘Oh, yes, why not? Rather than be perpetually told how obstinate, and self-willed, and sullen I am, I would go to Timbuctoo, or Hong Kong, or any other cheerful spot.’

‘You would not try a warmer climate first?’ with hesitation. ‘You know Sir James spoke of——’

‘No. I will go to Strangemore, or nowhere. I have always had a fancy for it. Even long, long ago—how short a time in reality—when Billy and I used to go nesting and fishing there, we thought it the sweetest spot on earth. I almost think it so still. Is it not odd that I should look with such kindness upon the scene of my greatest trouble?’

‘Hush!’ with a shudder, ‘do not let us think of it.’

‘Why not? I often do. It seems very far away now. *She* had her grievance, too, poor soul.’

‘When will you start?’ abruptly. ‘Next week? Monday?’

‘To-morrow,’ with decision. ‘The sooner the better.’

If I die on the way,' with cruel gaiety, 'blame yourself for it, and remember you would have it so.'

'To-morrow, then,' says Duke, with a long sigh.

. . . . .

## CHAPTER XXIX.

As I cross the threshold and enter the old hall at Strangemore a great passionate rush of unrestrainable rapture flows over me. Sudden recollections and emotions threaten to overpower me. I am at home, at rest, at last! With an impulsive movement I put my hand to my heart. Each well-remembered object sends out to me a thousand welcomes. With silent joy I greet them.

Yet, compelled by the strange wilfulness that sorrow and loneliness have bred within me, I conceal all this from Marmaduke, and returning the servants' salutations with a courtesy, kind but subdued, I go slowly up the stairs and into my own room.

All is changed; I pause and gaze around me with much wonder. Carpets, curtains—all are unfamiliar, and where white once mingled with the gold, pale pink appears.

The doors beyond are flung wide. What was formerly 'Duke's dressing-room is now transformed into a boudoir, while the apartment beyond that again is an exquisitely furnished reception-room.

In the boudoir a small fire burns, and though we may count ourselves now well into the summer, still the bright flames look warm and homelike, and involuntarily I stretch out my hands to their friendly warmth.

A knock at the door. Instead of calling out 'come in,' I go forward, and opening it, find myself face to face with my husband.

‘You will not come down to dinner?’ he says, but his tone is a question—almost an entreaty.

‘No,’ I return, ungratefully; ‘I am too tired. I shall be better alone.’

His face expresses disappointment.

‘I am sure you are right,’ he says, moving away; ‘try to rest, and forget your fatigue.’

The remnant of conscience I still retain here smites me.

‘My rooms are so pretty,’ I say, quickly, following him a step or two; ‘they are lovely. Was it all your own taste? It was so good of you to do it for me.’

‘You are pleased?’ colouring. ‘I fancied you would like them changed.’

‘It was more than good of you,’ I say again, remorsefully. ‘You think of everything, and I am always ungrateful.’

‘Nonsense. Get back your old spirits, and I shall be richly rewarded.’ Then, with a sudden unexpected movement, ‘You are welcome home, Phyllis,’ he says, and bending, presses his lips to mine.

It is the very first caress he has offered me since our second marriage; and now it is the lightest, fleetest thing conceivable. Confused and puzzled, I turn back into my room, with a sensation that is almost fear at my heart. What a cold, unloving kiss. A mere touching of the lips, without warmth or lingering pressure. What if he has ceased to love me.

. . . . .  
We toil, through pain and wrong,  
We fight, and fly;  
We love, we lose, and then, ere long,  
Stone dead we lie.  
O life! is all thy song  
Endure—and die.

The sorrowful despairing words repeat themselves over and over again in my brain. They fascinate and yet repel me. Why must the wretchedness of this world so heavily overbalance the good?



I fling the small volume from me with some impatience as Marmaduke comes in.

He has been studiously cold to me of late ; indeed he has shown an open and marked avoidance of my company. It has at times forced itself upon me that he bitterly repents his hasty persistence at Hazleton, and would now gladly sever the tie that binds us—were that possible.

At this moment he is looking bored and *ennuyé* to the last degree, as he goes to one of the windows and stands idly gazing out over the park and woodlands. Not once, as he crosses the room, do his eyes fall upon me.

And yet surely, I am now better worth regarding, than in those first days at Hazleton, when he appeared so anxious to make me his own. It is the latter end of July. warm, sultry, glorious July, and I am once more the Phyllis of old. My cheeks are round and soft and childlike as of yore—my eyes are bright and clear, and have lost their unnatural largeness—my figure has regained its original healthy elasticity ; yet Marmaduke heeds me not.

Suddenly, with some abruptness, and without turning to look at me, he says—

‘Don’t you think it would be an improvement to ask some people down here, eh ? It might make things more cheerful for you. Just the old lot, you know.’

So at last he has made open confession of the dullness that I feel sure has been consuming him : he has discovered that a very little of my society, taken singly, would go a long way. Well, I too will let *him* see how gladly I shall welcome strangers to our hearth.

‘I am so glad you mentioned it,’ I say, briskly ; ‘I have been wishing of late for some break-in on our monotony. Harriet and Bébé will come I feel sure, and, oh ! poor little Chips, I had forgotten he is at present broiling in India ; but Chandos will not refuse,

I think; and Blanche Going, and Sir Mark Gore. These latter I add with some innocent malice.

‘Sir Mark Gore is in Norway,’ replies ‘Duke, stiffly.

‘Indeed! Then we must put up with his loss. But Blanche Going, where is she?’

‘Probably in Jamaica, for all I know, or care,’ unamiably.

‘What an answer! Poor Blanche, if she could only hear you. You should remember,’ Duke, that flippancy, though excusable in a woman, is simply brutal in a man. Solitude disagrees with you—you grow downright rude.’

‘If I was rude, I apologise,’ returns he, carelessly. Then having whistled straight through his favourite air most successfully, and wound up with an elaborate flourish, he walks through the open window on to the balcony outside.

‘Very good; ask them all as soon as you like,’ he says over his shoulder, with a languid nod; ‘and go for a stroll; the day is too fine to spend indoors.’

He runs down the steps and disappears.

‘I was going to beg an invitation if I did not receive it,’ says Harriet, a week later, as she returns my kiss of welcome. ‘I was growing very uneasy about you. But,’ tapping my cheek, ‘I might have spared myself any worry on the subject of your health, as you are looking provokingly well.’

Bébé declares I have caused them all more trouble than I am worth, whereupon I take her in custody, and march her upstairs, and run her into her bedroom.

Just before dinner, Chandos arrives, having been driven over from a country house some miles distant, where he has been staying.

Bébé greets him with a light laugh that has nothing in it of nervousness, or suppressed pleasure. It is purely indifferent. For the moment I feel puzzled, and disappointed.

‘Strangemore seems to be our established meeting ground after long absences,’ she says, giving him her hand. ‘Let me congratulate you on having escaped cholera and lawless tribes in the East.’

‘I have only been a week in England since my return,’ replies he, ceremoniously, ‘and have been kept pretty busy all that time, or I would have allowed myself the pleasure of calling upon you and Mrs. Beatoun. I did not know you were again staying with Lady Handcock.’

‘Oh, Harriet cannot do without me now,’ says Bébé, with a little saucy glance at Harry, who smiles and shakes her head. ‘She finds me invaluable.’

‘How infinitely obliged your mother must be to Lady Handcock,’ says Chandos, mischievously.

‘For taking me off her hands? Ah! see what comes of associating with barbarians,’ retorts Bébé, with a shrug.

Yet with all their badinage and apparent unconcern, I can perceive an undercurrent of constraint between these two. During all the first week, this forced gaiety and determined forgetfulness of the sweet and bitter past continues—and then it falls away. Silence and avoidance take their place, and in Chandos especially I notice a distinct avoidance of all converse bordering on a *tête-à-tête*.

I am beginning to despair of any good result arising from this second bringing together of them in my house, when one evening shortly before the termination of their visit, a something, a mere trifle occurs, that is yet sufficient to alter the tenor of more lives than one.

It is the 27th of August. Dinner is at an end, and tired of strolling in the grounds and gardens—so softly perfumed by the night flowers—we three women pass into the lighted drawing-room, while Marmaduke and Chandos linger outside on the balcony to finish their cigars.

I let my fingers wander idly over the piano, and now and again hum softly some old air, or ballad.

‘Bébé, sing something for us to-night,’ I say, coaxingly, rising from the piano-stool. She is not fond of letting us hear her perfectly beautiful voice. ‘Anything you like yourself, only sing.’

‘Don’t ask me,’ she objects, languidly. ‘It is so long since I have sung that I scarcely know any song correctly. Harriet will tell you, I rarely, if ever, touch the piano.’

‘But you must,’ I persist, ‘break down if you will, only let me hear your voice. Remember there are no ungenerous critics here, and nobody’s singing pleases me so much as yours.’

‘Do, Miss Beatoun,’ says someone.

It is Chandos. He and Marmaduke have come in through the open window, and are now standing in its embrasure, framed in by the hanging curtains on either side.

The tone of his voice strikes me as being odd. He is looking eagerly, fixedly, at her; will she refuse this sudden unexpected request of his? Coming after his late coldness it surprises even me.

Bébé raises to his a face, smiling, but pale.

‘Well, yes, I will sing you something,’ she says, and taking my place, strikes a few lingering chords.

‘I have no music with me,’ she continues, with her face turned from us, ‘so you must be satisfied with whatever comes first to me.’ Then she begins—

Along the grass sweet airs are blown  
 Our way, this day in spring;  
 Of all the songs that we have known,  
 Now which one shall we sing?  
 Not that, my love, ah! no;  
 Not this? my love? why so?  
 Yet both were ours, but hours will come and go.  
 The branches cross above our eyes,  
 The skies are in a net,  
 And what’s the thing beneath the skies  
 We two would most forget?

Not birth, my love, no, no,  
Not death, my love, no, no,  
The love once ours, but ours long hours ago.

As she comes to the last line, a curious wild sadness that is almost despair, mingles with the petulant defiance that has hitherto characterised her tone. And the music? where has she got it? So weird, so pathetic, so full of passionate recklessness.

When she has finished we are silent. I feel horribly inclined to cry, yet scarcely know why; and am certain Marmaduke's eyes are fastened upon me.

Somebody says 'Thank you,' and then we all follow suit. Chandos alone is silent.

'Why will you sing sad songs, Bébé?' exclaims 'Duke, rather impatiently; and Bébé laughs—

'I suppose because I am such a dismal animal myself,' she replies lightly, and rising, comes over to me.

The moonlight streams across the carpet, rebuking the soft radiance of the lamps. A hush has fallen upon us. Her song's refrain almost repeats itself aloud through the stillness. Two tears fall quietly upon my clasped hands. 'The love *once* ours—'

Pushing the curtain aside with one hand, Chandos says in a low determined tone—

'Will you come and see how the gardens look by moonlight?'

He addresses no one, he mentions no name, but his eyes are fixed on Bébé; he has forgotten all, everything but her. Putting my own thoughts from me, I listen with breathless eagerness for her answer. Well do I know it is the third and last appeal. Should she reject this, she will indeed lose for ever the heart that truly loves her. At length she speaks—

'Yes, if you wish it,' she says, letting the words fall from her with singular sweetness.

She joins him, and together they go out on the balcony, down the steps, and so disappear.

'I am so rejoiced,' exclaims Harriet, plaintively,

when they are well out of hearing. 'Now, I do hope they will marry each other, and bring their little comedy to a successful close. I am sure we must all confess it has had a sufficiently long run.'

'Yes, I sang it on purpose. I don't mind acknowledging it to you,' cries Bébé, hours afterwards, flinging her arms round my neck, and hiding her face out of sight. 'And was it not well I did—was it not well? Oh Phyllis! though I sang it so bravely, there was a terrible fear at my heart all the time. I wished him to know, and yet I dreaded his knowing. Can you understand? I dreaded his guessing my motive too clearly, and yet it was my last chance.'

'Dearest, I am so glad.'

'Ah! what tortures I have endured this past fortnight. I felt convinced he no longer cared for me; and I knew I could not be happy without him. But he does love me—more than ever, he says—and now I shall have him always.' She pauses to indulge in a little rapturous sob. 'Phyllis, never mistake obstinacy for pride!'

Harriet and I agree in thinking them the most charming of lovers. Indeed, as an engaged pair, they are a pattern to all others similarly afflicted. They never glower at us when we enter the room unexpectedly, and they don't blush. They get rid of all the inevitable spooning by going for long walks together, where no one can witness, or be distressed by their absurd appreciation of each other's society. And they actually refrain from making eyes at one another across the dining-table. When I say that they manage to keep themselves alive to the fact that there are other people in the world besides themselves, I consider I have spoken volumes in their favour, and have done them every justice.

When they leave at the end of the week, I positively miss them, and wish them back again; but as the wedding is to take place almost immediately, further delay in the country is impossible.

Marmaduke and I fall once more into our old ways seeing as little as may be of each other.

Although I will not confess it even to myself, I am sick at heart. With the return of my good health has come back my old horror of loneliness, and the girlish longing for some one to sympathise with me in all the pleasures and troubles of my daily life. Not even the frequent visits of mother, and Dora—who with her husband is staying at Summerleas—can make up to me for what I believe I have lost.

When it is too late, I learn how precious a thing I have cast away. By my own capricious folly, and through wilful temper, I have for ever alienated 'Duke's affection. Very rarely does he speak to me; still more rarely of his own accord does he seek my presence. I no longer afford him any joy. It is only too apparent that he has ceased to care for me.

Full of such thoughts and misgivings I one day creep upstairs to the little turret chamber, where—while still Phyllis Vernon—I once stood with Marmaduke to gaze down upon the crowded parterre beneath. In another tiny apartment opening off this, is a deeply cushioned window, in which it is my usual practice to sit and read such works as serve to distract my mind from the vague regrets that now for ever haunt it.

I have at length brought myself to feel some interest in the hero of my tale, when approaching voices warn me that foes to my solitude draw near. Not wishing to be disturbed, I move still further back into my window, I pull the curtains across me, so that no one in the adjoining room could by any chance see me.

I can distinguish George Ashurst's jerky tones, and then Marmaduke's distinct, though low. There seems to me something argumentative in their discourse, and the footsteps come slowly, as though every now and then they stood to dispute a point.

Suddenly my own name is mentioned, and putting down my book, I wait to hear what will follow.

Of course I know perfectly well in my own mind that I ought to rise at once, and honourably declare myself, but equally well in my own mind that I will do no such thing. What can 'Duke be saying about me? As they enter the turret his words ring out plain and stern.

'I tell you, Ashurst, I can stand the life I am leading no longer. You cannot understand what it is to see the woman you love—to see your wife, treat you as the very commonest stranger. Good feeling alone, I honestly believe, prevents her from showing me absolute hatred.'

'Pooh! my dear fellow,' says George. 'I don't believe a word of it. She is too kind a little soul to hate anyone; and you, least of all. Of course the whole thing, you know, was unfortunate, you know, and that, but it will all come right in the end.'

'I daresay. When I am in my grave,' says Marmaduke, bitterly. 'You are a good fellow, George, but you can't know everything, and I am not to be persuaded in this matter. She was right; I should never have insisted on that second marriage; it has only made her life more miserable, and placed a fretting chain around her neck. But indeed I meant it for the best.'

'What else could you have done, you know?' interposes kindly George.

I have gained my feet, and am standing, trembling with hope and fear, in my hiding-place—my hand grasping the sheltering curtain for protection and support. At this moment, I no longer deceive myself, by my passionate eagerness to hear what more 'Duke may say, I know that all my heart is his. And he loves me! Oh, the relief—the almost painful rapture, this certainty causes me—hush! he speaks again.

'I shall torment her no longer with my presence. I have delayed here too long already, but I hoped recovered health, and the old associations, might give her a kindlier feeling towards me. Now I feel convinced she never loved me. Let her live her life in



peace. She will grow gay and bright, and like the child Phyllis I first knew, when she feels sure she has seen the last of me.'

'Well, well, well,' says George, 'I suppose there is no use in anyone's speaking; but to me it is incomprehensible; why she cannot be content and happy in this charming place, with the best fellow in the world for her husband, is more than I can fathom. But it seems to me now, Carrington, really, you know,—that *you* very seldom speak to *her*; eh?'

(Good George—dear George.) 'Why should I put myself in the way of a cold reply? I detest forcing myself upon anyone—and when she is by her own avowal happier when absent from me. Bah! let us forget the subject—to me it is a hateful one.'

'Then why on earth, when you knew all this beforehand, did you insist on marrying her again?'

'Because there was nothing else to be done. Better to bear a name distasteful to her, than to bear none at all. I did it for her sake.'

'Then do you mean me to understand that you yourself had no interest in the matter?'

There is a pause—a long one—and my heart actually stops beating; at length—

'Do not think that,' says 'Duke, in a low tone. 'The love I felt for her on our first wedding morning is, if possible, deeper and truer now. Though at times my chains gall and almost madden me, yet I would not exchange them for fetters soft as down. At least she is mine; insomuch as that no other man can claim her. And I have this poor consolation in my loneliness, that though she does not love *me*, she at all events cares for no one else.'

'Poor little Phyllis,' murmurs George Ashurst, tenderly.

'You are a happy man, George,' says 'Duke, adopting a lighter tone, 'do not let my troubles depress you.'

'Yes; Dora is a perfect wife,' declares my brother-

in-law, with honest content; 'good-bye, Carrington, I will come over about that house either to-night or to-morrow morning early.'

'Better come to-night and sleep,' urges 'Duke, and George, half consenting, goes noisily down the stairs.

When he has been gone at least five minutes, I steal from my concealment, and entering the turret chamber, walk softly towards Marmaduke, who is standing with his back turned to me, gazing down through the window upon the lawn beneath. His attitude betokens deep thought. I go lightly to his side, and let my eyes follow the direction his have taken.

'Dreaming, 'Duke?' I ask, gaily.

He starts violently as I wake him from his reverie, and betrays astonishment not only at my presence at this moment, but also at my altered demeanour.

'Almost, I think,' he says, after a moment's hesitation. It is so long since I have addressed him with anything approaching to *bonhomie*.

'How short the evenings are getting,' I go on, peering out into the dusk. 'Marmaduke, do you remember the large party you had in these gardens before we were married?'

'Yes.'

'And how we two stood just here, and looked down upon them?'

'I remember well.' He is evidently intensely puzzled by my manner, which is cordial to the last degree.

'How long ago it seems now, does it not?'

'Very long.'

I am not progressing—I feel this, and pause for a moment.

'You are dressed for dinner,' I remark, presently, 'so early?'

'Not so very early—it is half-past six.'

'Indeed! how the time has flown. Well, let me

add this to your appearance to make you perfect.' I detach a little red rose-bud from the bosom of my dress, and place it with lingering carefulness in his coat. I believe as I do so, he imagines I have developed the crowning phase of my malady, by going mad. 'Duke,' with perfect unconcern, and with my head a little on one side to mark the effect made by my rose—'Duke, don't you think it is time now I should give up my invalid habits, and learn to change my dress every evening like a civilised being?'

'I think you would be very foolish, Phyllis, to try any changes just yet.'

'But don't you think me much better and stronger in every way?'

'Very much better. Your face has gained its old colour, and your arms have regained the pretty soft roundness they had when you were—that is—before we married.'

I pull up the loose sleeve of my dress and look with some satisfaction upon the 'pretty soft roundness.' My old weakness for compliments is strong upon me.

'Why did you not finish your sentence?' I ask, slyly; 'you were going to say when I was a *girl*.'

'Because you look such a girl still—such a mere child, indeed—that I thought it would sound absurd.'

'I am glad of that. I would wish to be young and fresh always.'

'There was a time,' with a faint smile, 'when you longed with equal vigour to be old, and worldly-wise.'

'Ah, yes—what a goose I was then! But really, though, I am growing horribly fat. My hands even, see how plump they are.'

I lay five slight little fingers in his, confidently; I can see how he reddens at my touch. He holds them softly, and turns them over to see the pink palm at the other side, and then turns them back again, but he does not speak—very slowly, but with determination, he lets them go.

‘No fear of my wedding-ring coming off now,’ I say, cheerfully, though somewhat disconcerted at the failure of my last little ruse; ‘not even when I wash my hands does it stir. I won’t be able to get rid of it in a hurry.’

‘That seems rather a pity, does it not?’ remarks he, bitterly.

‘A pity? Why? I would never forgive myself if I lost it.’

‘Would you have nothing in the past altered, Phyllis?’ he asks, suddenly, and curiously, turning for the first time to confront me.

‘Some things—yes. But not my wedding-ring, certainly.’

‘Good little Phyllis,’ murmurs he, somewhat sadly; ‘your recovered health has restored to you your good-nature.’

‘It was not good-nature,’ I protest, eagerly, feeling strangely inclined to cry. ‘I said it because I meant it. But come,’ hastily, fearing I have said too much, ‘dinner must be ready, we had better go down-stairs.’

Marmaduke leaves the window, and moves towards the door, allowing me to follow.

‘Have you forgotten your manners,’ I cry, playfully, ‘will you not conduct me downstairs? Give me your arm, Duke.’

‘Your spirits are very high to-night—are they not?’ he says, smiling. ‘I am glad to see you so like your old self, as now I can with a clearer conscience leave home.’

‘Are you leaving?’

‘Yes. You know I promised myself to go abroad in the autumn. I will arrange with Billy, or your mother, to stay with you while I am away.’

‘If you are going, well and good,’ I return, quietly, ‘but do not arrange matters for me. I will have no one to stay with me in your absence.’

‘What! not even Billy?’

‘Not even Billy,’ I say, firmly.

We get through dinner almost without a comment. My sudden overflow of geniality has entirely forsaken me. I am as mute, as depressed, as in those first days at Hazleton.

Rising from the table as soon as custom will permit me, I make my way to the drawing-room, where I sit in moody discontent.

I am wretched—most miserable; doubly so in that I can see no plan of escape from my troubles lying clear before me. I rest my aching head on my hands and try to think; but always his saddened face, and averted eyes, are to be seen. We are so close—yet so divided. Only a wall or two, a door, a passage, but miles might be said to separate us—so far apart are we in sympathy. At this moment I know he is sitting in the library, silent, companionless.

And then a great desire rises within me. Throwing aside my book, with nervous determination, I walk down the drawing-room, through the door, across the hall, never pausing until I find myself before the library door.

I knock hurriedly, lest by any chance my ebbing courage should entirely evaporate; and my heart almost dies within me, as the well-known voice calls out ‘come in.’

I open, and advance a few steps into the room. A slight fire is burning in the grate—it is the beginning of September, and already the evenings show symptoms of coming cold—Marmaduke is seated at the table, busily engaged, with writing materials all around him.

‘What is it, Phyllis?’ he asks, expectantly, the pen still in his hand.

‘Oh! nothing,’ I return, awkwardly, failing miserably as I come to the point; ‘nothing to signify; another time will do. You are busy now. What are you writing, Duke?’

‘I was drawing out my will,’ he replies, smiling. ‘I thought it better do so, before leaving home for—for an indefinite time. No one knows what may happen: I am glad you have come in just now, as you may as well hear what I have written, and see if you wish anything altered. Now listen.’

‘I will not,’ I cry, petulantly. ‘I hate wills and testaments, and all that kind of thing. I won’t listen to a word of it; and—and I hope with all my heart I shall die before you.’

‘My dear Phyllis!’ Then quickly, ‘You are excited, you have something on your mind—what did you come to me for just now, Phyllis—tell me?’

Now, or never. I am conscious of a chill feeling at my heart, but I close one hand over the other tightly, and thus supported, go on bravely.

‘Yes, I did come to tell you something. That—that I love you. And—oh, ‘Duke—if you leave me again, you will kill me.’

Here I burst into a perfect passion of weeping, and cover my face with my hands.

There is not a movement in the room, not a sound, except my heavy bursting sobs. Then someone puts an arm round me, and presses my head down upon his breast. I look up into Marmaduke’s face. He is white as death; and though he is evidently putting a terrible restraint upon himself, I can see that his lips, beneath his fair moustache, are trembling.

‘You are tired, Phyllis, over-fatigued,’ he says, soothingly. ‘Lie still, here; and you will be better presently.’

‘It is not that,’ I cry, passionately, ‘not that at all. Oh, Marmaduke! hear me now—do not punish me for my past coldness. I love you with all my heart; try to believe me.’

‘I cannot,’ he whispers, huskily. ‘I have been too long living in the other belief. To hope again, only to be again cast down, would be my death. I do not dare imagine it possible you love me.’

‘But I do, I do,’ I sob piteously, flinging my arms around his neck. ‘I always, always liked you better than anyone else, but during these past few months I have learned to love you so well, that I cannot be happy without you. When I heard you say this evening, you intended leaving me again, I thought my heart would have broken.’

Turning up my face so that the full glare of the lamp falls upon it, Marmaduke gazes at me as though he would read the innermost workings of my heart.

‘Is this the truth?’ he asks. ‘Are you sure you are not deceiving yourself and me?’

‘Must I say it again? Can you not see by me how it is?’ I answer, still crying; I am a perfect Niobe by this time, and am dismally conscious that the top of my nose is degenerating into a warm pink. ‘I am sure I’m unhappy enough for anything.’

Not noticing the rather ungracious tendency of this latter remark, ‘Duke draws me closer to him, and, stooping his head, presses his cheek to my wet one.

‘My love, my life,’ he whispers, and holds me as though he never meant again to let me go.

We are quite silent for a few minutes—during which a great content, such as I have never before known, creeps into my heart. Then ‘Duke, with a long happy sigh, partly releases me. His eyelashes I can see are wet with tears, but there is the very sweetest and tenderest smile upon his lips.

‘I have not waited in vain,’ he says. ‘At last I can call you mine. At last; and just when I had given up all hope—darling—darling!’

It is half-an-hour later and we are now thoroughly comfortable—full of rest and quiet joy.

We are sitting before the library fire; I on a low stool, with my head leaning against ‘Duke’s knee, he, with one hand round my neck, while with the other he every now and then ruffles, or, as he fondly believes,

smooths, my 'nut-brown locks.' For the last three or four minutes no words have passed between us. I think we are too happy to give way to the mere expression of our feelings.

Suddenly, all in one moment as it seems to us, without any warning, we hear a loud voice outside the door, a heavy footstep, a rapid turning of the handle, and George Ashurst is in the room.

I make one desperate effort to rise, and recover the dignity my attitude has destroyed, but 'Duke, with a strong detaining grasp, prevents me. I get only as far as my knees, and from that position glare at my brother-in-law, as though I would willingly devour him.

'I took your offer of a bed after all,' he is beginning, when something in the situation strikes him as odd.

He meets my eyes, and breaks down. 'Oh, ah! I had no idea—I didn't know, you know.' He stops, hopelessly, looking as ludicrously silly and puzzled as even I could wish him.

'Neither did I,' declares Marmaduke, with a laugh, 'until half-an-hour ago. But it is all right, Ashurst, we have made it up, and when I do go abroad, I will take my wife with me.'

'Didn't I tell you all along how it was?' cries George, enthusiastically (he had not; but by a super-human effort I refrain from contradicting him); 'I declare to you,' says he, subsiding into a chair, 'I was never so glad of anything in all my life before.'

There is a minute's pause. Then 'Duke, turning, lays a light caressing touch upon my shoulder as I kneel beside him. He speaks in a very low tone.

'We are all very glad, I think—and thankful,' he says with the softest, tenderest smile.

. . . . .

All was ended now, the hope, and the fear, and the sorrow;  
All the aching of heart, the restless, unsatisfied longing;  
All the dull, deep pain, and constant anguish of patience!





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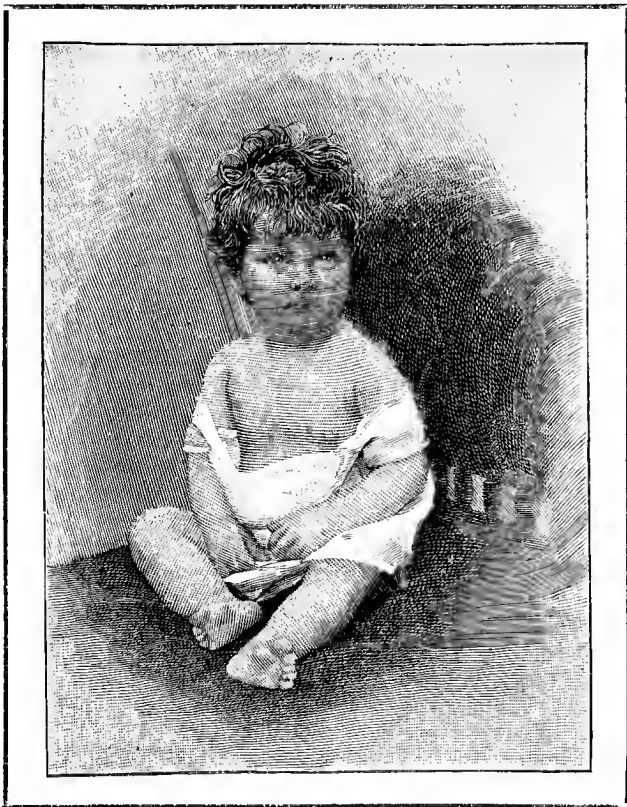
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